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War is always Gendered even if Women are absent from its Study. A Discussion

Anna Kulemann

Abstract

War and conflict are, arguably, amongst the most gendered political interactions. Through the lens of constructivism, this article investigates socially constructed gendered narratives in relation to conflict and violence that are closely linked with military values and assumptions about world order. Analysing the selective gendered media coverage of the Abu Ghraib scandal as an example, the visibility/invisibility/hyper-visibility problem of gender in wartime is elaborated. It is demonstrated how the media discourse on the torture scandal that focused predominantly on female Private First Lynndie England manifests the inequality of women in the military and strongly supports Elshtain's (1982: 343) thesis that gendered narratives serve certain ends and "operate to forestall considerations of possible alternatives to war and peace". The theoretical and practical policy implications of silencing gender in war and conflict as well as gaps and silences are discussed.

Keywords: constructivism, discourse, gender visibility, Lynndie England, Abu Ghraib

> The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself.
>
> — Virginia Woolf (1929: 72)

Introduction

War and conflict are, arguably, amongst the most gendered political interactions (Goldstein 2001; Khalili 2011; Sjoberg 2009; Tickner 1992; USIP

2012; Young 2003). Yet, until recently, even though war has been comprehensively studied across the disciplines, the interaction of gender[1] and war was rarely noticed, or dismissed as natural, and was therefore not part of mainstream academic discourse. Women have been most often excluded from debates on belligerence and endure untold suffering leading, if at all, to the perpetuation of the stereotype of their passive victimhood (Annan, Blattman, and Mazurana 2011; Carpenter 2002; Coulter 2008; Enloe 2013; Herrman and Pamieri 2010; Naaman 2007). However, women have always had important (albeit most often unnoticed) functions in wartime and the extent of female participation in war and violence increased worldwide (Abdi 2007; Annan et al. 2011; Butler 1993; Ness 2007; Nordstrom 2005; Riley 2008; Sjoberg 2010).

This article investigates the visibility of gender in war and conflict that is closely linked with the collective gendered understanding of military values and assumptions about world order. Starting with conceptualising gender and war through the lens of constructivism, socially constructed gendered narratives are analysed. Debatably, military values have often served to justify and enforce male dominance and to further consolidate patriarchy. This is exemplified by the way the U.S. military operates a double standard: On the one hand, female participation in decision making and conflict are promoted and on the other the military structure arguably resists to give up a patriarchal hierarchy. While war is always gendered on various levels of society, it is argued that gender is sometimes (deliberately) rendered invisible and sometimes made (hyper-)visible. Focusing particularly on women in wartime, this is what Riley (2008: 1192) refers to as the "visibility/invisibility/hyper-visibility problem". The case of prisoner abuses in Abu Ghraib and its gendered selective media coverage is analysed. Debatably, Private First Lynndie England, a 21-year-old processing clerk, was deliberately made the hyper-visible face of the scandal, while her male superiors largely remained invisible in the background. It is argued that the way in which Lynndie England was made the hyper-visible face of the scandal exemplifies how female subordination is often exacerbated in the context of war and how the invisibility as well as temporary hyper-visibility of gender in wartime perpetuates socially constructed gender roles. Finally, gaps and silences are identified and possible implications are explored.

Conceptualisation and underlying assumptions of the field

Classic realist landmark contributions to International Relations Theory such as Hobbes' (1900) *Leviathan*, Morgenthau's (1948) *Politics Among Nations* or

[1] While sex refers to biological differences between men and women, gender describes the characteristics that a society qualifies as masculine or feminine. Hence, gender must not be equated with women.

Waltz' neo-realist *Man, the State and War* (1959) remain largely silent on gender. The canonical work on International Relations and consequently on war arose from gender assumptions arguably leading to an inherently masculine state identity (Elshtain 1982; Sjoberg 2010; Young 2003). Yet, the motherland, which is commonly fought for, is usually gendered female (Jeffreys 2007; Howard and Prividera 2008). Today, war is often still understood phalocentrically (Enloe 2013; Herrman and Pamieri 2010; Tickner 1992).

This article analyses gender and war broadly and visibility/invisibility/hyper-visibility of gender in the torture scandal of Abu Ghraib (Iraq) in more detail through the lens of constructivism. Following different schools of thought, constructivist scholarship is not homogenous. However, most constructivists share the ontological minimal consensus that structures and actors in International Relations are socially constructed and thus bring intersubjective meaning to the material world (Adler 1997; Checkel 1998; Epstein 2011, 2013a, b; Hopf 1998; Wendt 1992). Unlike rationalist theories ([neo-] realism and [neo-] liberalism), constructivism does not consider interests and identities as exogenously given but rather regards them mutually constitutive (Epstein 2011; Wendt 1992; Hopf 1998). This is why, for Hopf (1998: 192), constructivism "offers an account of the politics of identity", proposing a way of understanding intersubjective concepts (such as race or gender) and their interaction with global politics. Thus, it can be argued that constructivism offers an alternative understanding of power, state identity and interest, gender and prospect for change in world politics (Adler 1997; Hopf 1998). Moreover, constructivism shows how most of the durable institutions build upon collective understandings and reified structures that were *ex nihilo* invented by human consciousness (Adler 1997). It can be argued that certain gender roles today are (subconsciously) internalised and naturalised. Thus, for constructivists the social world is not given, and neither are gender roles.

However, in classic constructivist understanding, as particularly evident in Wendt's (1992) work, the state is arguably insufficiently conceptualised. In realist fashion, Wendt (1992: 379) treats states as single identities with single sets of interests. Consequently, it is often (wrongly) assumed that "what applies to individuals applies to states as well"[2] (Epstein 2011: 327; Weldes 1996). To overcome this "fallacy of composition", the presumption that the state has a self, Epstein (2011, 2013b) suggests analysing discourse to study state identities. Language is central to constructivist theorising and a medium of social construction, indeed "the primary social institution" (Searle 1995: 59-60; Epstein 2013a, b). Similarly, speech is "a symbolic invocation which creates, ex nihilo, a new order of being in the relations between men [sic]" (Epstein 2013a: 287). For Buzan (2010: 175) and Weldes (1999: 117-

[2] For Epstein (2010: 1), Jaques Lacan's 'speaking object' offers instead a non-essentialist basis for theorising about identity that has been largely overlooked.

18) popular (or rather mass) culture, highly influenced by mass media, both contribute to and mirror the construction of reality of international politics.

People in Western societies are traditionally socialised to believe that there is an innate bond between men and violence (Goldstein 2001; Sjoberg 2009; Thornhill and Palmer 2000; Tickner 1992; USIP 2012). In Bourdieu's (2001) understanding of social structure gender is, like all forms of collective identity, the outcome of social classification (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Weininger 2005). Relying on Foucault's theorisation of power, Butler (1993) argues that gender is constructed through relations of power. Through "ritualized repetition of [gender] norms" (Butler 1993: preface) gender categories are socially constructed that Fotaki (2011: 642) therefore regards "arbitrary and unstable". Therefore, gender is performative rather than given (Butler 1993). Campbell (1998) demonstrates that states constantly (re)produce their identities through performative acts (see Epstein 2013b; Weldes 1999). Thus, a "gender dichotomy" (Connell 1987: 1) is arguably constructed leading to the legitimisation of patriarchal political and social order.

From a nurture perspective, the relation between gender and war is reciprocal: "warriors are constructed as masculine, and masculinity is constructed through war" (Vojdik 2002: 266; Goldstein 2001; USIP 2012; Weininger 2005). This is why, according to Vojdik (2002: 266), men are compelled to prove their identity "through symbolic (…) enactment of masculinity. Within the military, such enactments abound. Warriors are male. Recruits are called 'pussy", "fucking little girl" (Faludi 1999: 145-6), "sissies, girls, or fags" (Vojdik 2002: 266) or are directly accused of "being a woman in order to toughen them up" (Jeffreys 2007: 18; Phillips 2006). Elshtain (1982: 341) argues that the most fundamental societal gendered assumption is that of the two "powerful and deeply held archetypes, the Beautiful Soul and the Just Warrior" that influence the way we think about men, women and war. *Just warriors* do not fight in war just to kill but to die for the cause. This is how, in the words of Sjoberg (2010: 55), "women are at once the object of fighting and the just purpose of war". While men are associated with being heroic, tough, assertive and stoical, females are *beautiful souls*[3] that are vulnerable, naïve, innocent, voice-less and even unpatriotic victims in need of protection (Elshtain 1982; Enloe 2013; Segal 2008; Sjoberg 2010; Tickner 1992; USIP 2012). Thus, in patriarchal societies, "to be feminized is to be made dependent, to be independent is to be masculinized" (Enloe 2013: 12).

But how do socially constructed narratives like that of the beautiful soul influence political theory and practice, societal gender interplay and why does that even matter? In Elsthains (1982: 343) words: "Why can the warrior no longer be just and the soul no longer be beautiful?" Experiences of war, either as victims or perpetrators, are always influenced by the construction of gender (Annan et al. 2011; Riley 2008). The social construction of gender

[3] Derives from Hegel's (1979: 383-409) *Phenomenology of Mind*.

norms arguably serves as a basis of male dominated international politics and the vulnerable women in need of protection provide a rationale for war (Abdi 2007; Grant and Newland 1991; Tosh 2004; Young 2003). Arguably, men's established monopoly of institutionalised power aimed at maintaining male supremacy and existing hierarchies (Barrow 2010; Parashar 2013; Segal 2008). As a consequence thereof, women's agency is often questioned and "women's violence is associated with flaws in their femininity, maternity, physiology, or sexuality" (Sjoberg 2010: 58; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007).

Attempts and resistance to increased female integration into the military

According to Howard and Prividera (2008: 289), the U.S. military is founded in "patriarchy, hierarchy, (hyper-) masculinity, violence, and the marginalization of all expressions of femininity". Arguably, this is why, notwithstanding an increased extent of female participation in war and violence worldwide, women continue to experience violence and resistance to gender integration (Abdi 2007; Annan et al. 2011; Buttler 1993; Howard and Prividera 2008; Hermann and Palmieri 2010; Ness 2007; Nordstrom 2005; Riley 2008; Sjoberg 2010; U.S. Department of Defense 2006).

In this context, Enloe (2000: 237-238) argues that female recruitment and deployment in Western militaries is only taking place in ways "that will not subvert the fundamentally masculinized culture of the military". For Howard and Prividera (2008:291), the U.S. recruitment of women is thus "driven by need rather than a desire to promote gender equality and/or equity". Weinstein and D'Amico (1999) conclude that in order to conform to the (hyper-) masculine military space, female bodies and identities must be "camouflaged". Yet, women are not allowed to shave their heads, wear men's uniforms or take combat arms positions showing that women "are an uncomfortable addition to a men's military rather than truly interested, and that women are expected to be like women even when they must be like men as well" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 86). Arguably, female soldiers/perpetrators of violence in wartime are thus "anything but gender-neutral or gender-equal" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 84).

Addressing female integration into the military, Naaman (2007: 935) argues that when women decide to fight alongside men, "they challenge the dichotomy of women as victims/man as defender". Similarly, Karst (1991) suggests that female military integration challenges the identity of the warrior as male and Coulter (2008) argues that the category of female fighter confuses and challenges gendered stereotypes on multiple levels (see Vojdik 2002). Arguably, the engagement of U.S. soldiers in physical, psychological and sexual abuse, for example, against Prisoners of War in Abu Ghraib and other detention centres blurred the Manichean and ideological "divisions

between good and evil by featuring American "heroes" as violent perpetrators" (Holland 2009: 249; Alison 2004; Sjoberg 2010).

Arguably, one way to re-establish social and political order is through the maintenance of gender roles that are frequently challenged by social reality and by (policy) aims to reach gender equality and recognition of women (e.g. UN Resolution 1325). Particularly when taking the militaristic climate in the U.S. into account, it is of fundamental importance to examine the way in which the media support the military's masculine hegemonic structure via gendered narratives (Holland 2009; Howard and Prividera 2008). Gender is sometimes (deliberately) rendered invisible and sometimes made (hyper-) visible. Focusing particularly on women in wartime, this is what Riley (2008: 1192) refers to as the 'visibility/invisibility/hyper-visibility problem'. In the following, the way in which patriarchal militarism and the subordination of women is maintained, even where women are integrated into the military, is analysed. This is particularly evident in the highly publicised story of Private First Lynndie England, a female processing clerk serving in the 372nd U.S. Military Police Company in Iraq.

In 2004, one year after the U.S. and coalition forces invasion of Iraq, ...

... *60 Minutes II* (May 12) and *The New Yorker* (May 10) broke the story by publishing disturbing pictures of 'naked prisoners piled on top of each other, others hooded and wired with electrodes' (The Guardian 2004) accusing U.S. soldiers deployed at the U.S. military prison Abu Ghraib of torturing and abusing detainees (Brockes 2009; Howard and Prividera 2008; Holland 2009). Acts of torture and humiliation included dog attacks, forced masturbation, forced standing, electric shocks, (simulated) acts of homosexual sex, covering prisoners with excrements as well as threat of execution and sodomising. Significantly, turning male prisoners into women, for example by forcing them to wear women's underwear, was one form of torture (Brockes 2009; Danner 2004; Eisenstein 2007; Jeffreys 2007; Lankford 2009; Paeth 2008). Accordingly, female soldiers involved in torture practices were used to "cause maximum shame to men who [...] would be particularly susceptible to sexual humiliation by women" (Jeffreys 2007: 21; Riley 2008; Eisenstein 2007). Supported by previous psychological experiments (Burger 2009; Milgram 1963), Lankford (2009: 389) demonstrates that the "U.S. military transformed relatively normal soldiers into the abusive guards at Abu Ghraib". Even though the torture at Abu Ghraib has been frequently characterized as isolated incidents and blamed on a few "bad apples", there is vast evidence that "the U.S. military's extra-legal use of aggression, violence, and torture was not isolated – it was systematic" (Lankford 2009: 389). The Taguba Report (2004) confirmed that the abuses where neither performed in

absence of government agency approval nor that abuses in Abu Ghraib were isolated.

Ultimately, ten men and women were court-martialled for their involvement in the abuses at Abu Ghraib. However, no senior U.S. military officer has ever been formally charged or tried in court nor received, unlike Lynndie England, great media attention (Brockes 2009; Gronnvoll 2007; Howard and Prividera 2008; Paeth 2008).

Hyper-visible private first England

England's former high school teacher claimed "there was only one word to describe her presence in his classroom: 'Invisible'" (Brockes 2009). According to Chonin (2004), the images of England showing the abuses of prisoners in Abu Ghraib are among the "most iconic images of the new century". How did it come to be that England, regardless of official findings and her relatively low three year confinement, suddenly took centre stage, in other words, became the hyper-visible face of the scandal?

Arguably, England's femaleness drew the media's attention to her (Gronnvoll 2007; Holland 2009; Howard and Prividera 2008). In fact, the vigorously gendered nature of mainstream media coverage constantly emphasised England's femaleness as opposed to her role as a trained soldier and framed her as a fallen women through her professional, sexual and moral malfunction. Commonly, newspaper articles refer to England specifically as "woman" or "female" (e.g. Synovitz 2013), "girl soldier" (Jones 2009) or more creatively as Abu Ghraibs "poster girl" (Thomas 2004; Chonin 2004), the "t-shirted dog leash women" (Sisk 2005) or "patriotic, pixie-ish tomboy" (Thomas 2004; Duke 2004). Moreover, the media persistently described her as "small", "petite" or "young and innocent", as vulnerable rather than violent and as a person who couldn't be blamed for acting independently (Sjoberg 2010; Brockes 2009; Karpinski and Strasser 2005; Howard and Prividera 2008; Holland 2009; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; McKelvey 2005; Duke 2004). Riddell (2004) stated that England, "however unpleasant, is not the villain of this debate. She is what happens when politicians prosecute shambolic wars in the name of piety. Lined up behind a heap of bodies topped by her gleeful little face are the shadowy stylists for this cameo of prison life". Similarly, Duke (2004) wrote:

> She seems too small, even pixie-like, to be as sadistically abusive as she's portrayed […] Even her name […] sounds too innocently chirpy to belong to the woman posed in the porn shots taken during her Iraqi deployment. There's something so girlish about her, though she's 21, and something boyish, too.

This well illustrates how England is portrayed as gender abnormal, in other words, as "being inappropriately masculine as well as inappropriately female" (Holland 2009: 252).

Another way of diminishing England's agency as perpetrator and at the same time coding her as gender abnormal and thus not representative for women in general is arguably by coding her sexually confused (Gronnvoll 2007; Holland 2009; Howard and Prividera 2008). In the words of Nead (1984: 26), there is a moral double standard: "sexual desire [is] regarded in the man as normal and unavoidable, but [is] seen in the women as deviant and pathological". This is evident in the fact that the women involved in the prisoner abuse were most famous in the world of internet pornography (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 67). Frequently, media reported that England became involved in torture and abuse only because she tried "to please her soldier-boyfriend" (Tormentor 2005) by "exchanging sex for a feeling of safeness and protection" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 69). In fact, much of the media attention focused on how England became involved with male ring-leader Charles Graner. According to Zernike (2005), it was Graner who told England to attitudinise for the photographs holding a leash tied around the neck of a naked and crawling detainee. Later, he sent one photograph home. '"Look what I made Lynndie do". The now infamous pictures of detainees masturbating, he said, were "a birthday gift for her".

As Brockes (2009) asked England why she did not walk away from the photos she replied: "I didn't want them. But he [Graner] was so persistent. Go on! Just for me! If you loved me, you'd do it. I'm like, gee, OK just take the damned picture." When England was asked why she posed in front of naked detainees by Sales (2004), she claimed she was under orders and was told "to stand there, point, give a thumbs up, smile, look at the camera, take the picture" by persons in her "higher chain of command". Being asked why they wanted her to pose in the pictures she replied: "For Psyop [psychological operations] reasons, to show to other inmates, if you will or whatever, because I'm a female, and in the Muslim culture, it's very embarrassing or humiliating to be naked in front of another female, especially if it's an American." Here, England herself denies her agency but shows how she was conscious about her action. At the same time, the court found her "unable to understand her own guilty plea' in the trial" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 67). In the words of Sjoberg and Gentry (2007: 70), England's "violence is the fault of her womenhood or sexuality gone awry and of the men who made decisions for her, but could not have been her choice". As opposed to England, Graner (sentenced to ten years in prison) is relatively unknown. Arguably, however, "if women's role in the military was equal, then the male who ordered the tortures and were responsible for the worst abuses would be most well-known" (Jeffreys 2007: 21).

Invisible female detainees and male perpetrators

While much (media) attention is paid to abused male prisoners (or rather images of their excessively gendered and homosexualised bodies) and hyper-visible female perpetrators (in particular England) at Abu Ghraib, the existence and abuse of female prisoners by male U.S. soldiers in Iraqi jails has not been much reported about (Wilkinson 2004; Jeffreys 2007; Riley 2008). According to the US Department of Defense, 42 women have been held in Abu Ghraib (McKelvey 2005). While not much is known about 'what happened to the invisible female prisoners, 'many Iraqis believe that sexual abuse of women in U.S. run jails was rampant' (Wilkinson 2004). Moreover, U.S. army officials have acknowledged detaining innocent women in hopes of persuading male relatives to provide information (Wilkinson 2004; Jeffreys 2007).[4]

McKelvey (2005) reports about one account of a woman detained in Abu Ghraib: Selwa. Selwa reports that one way of degrading prisoners was to "force them to participate in the disposal of waste by stirring burning vats of excrement". She explains what happened as she once stopped stirring because of exhaustion: "There was another man close to us. The sergeant came up to me and whispered in my ear, 'If you don't, I will tell one of the soldiers to fuck you'" (McKelvey 2005). As reported by Wilkinson (2004), Swadi, the lawyer of a former female prisoner, said "her client fainted before providing further details of being raped and knifed by U.S. soldiers". Brockes (2009) asked England whether she knew about female prisoners. England responded:

> "'At one point we had four. Oh my God, this one, she was crazy.' […] She starts laughing. 'She was screaming and whatever.'
>
> Did she see any photos with women prisoners in them?
>
> Roy [her lawyer] says, 'The only thing I know is that someone got in trouble because he had had some contact with one of them.'
>
> England snorts and says, 'His dick had some contact.'"

While invisible to most of the world, women like Selwa are highly visible to her male captors who often regard their female body as their property (Riley 2008; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; McKelvey 2005).

In a nutshell, constructivism offers a framework to advance the understanding of gender as a social identity and practice in times of war and conflict. The media, as the main medium of social construction, not only contribute to but also mirror the construction of reality in international politics. Thus, the media is as interesting for what it omits as for what it covers and it is worth noting that most media are largely silent on female perpetrators

[4] This strongly conflicts with the norms and jurisprudence of International Humanitarian Law.

(with the exception of those that are portrait abnormal), female agency in conflict or male victims of wartime violence. As evident in the media coverage of the Abu Ghraib scandal, the integration of women into the military does not necessarily translate into gender equality but can also be used to perpetuate and reinforce gender stereotypes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the lens of constructivism it can be argued that war and the military are strongly influenced by and built upon constructed gender roles. Thus, the U.S. military and its interventions, arguably operating a double standard, aim to promote female participation on the one hand and resisting any ends which the military is built upon: masculinism. What Riley (2008) refers to as the visibility/invisibility/hyper visibility problem (of gender) is strikingly apparent in the abuses of detainees in Abu Ghraib (and most probably other detention centres and institutions). In the public mind and mainstream media coverage, England became the face everyone recognised while her male superior remained relatively invisible. The discriminating representations of England, focussing on her femaleness on the one hand and her "abnormality" on the other, can be understood as functioning "to reify the normalcy (and invisibility) of the male soldiers" gender as well as the gender categories upon which "military masculinity relies" (Holland 2009: 252; Howard and Prividera 2008). Clearly, the study of gender and war remains an area with significant gaps and silences. The case of England particularly manifests the inequality of women in the military and strongly supports Elshtain's (1982: 343) thesis that gendered narratives serve certain ends and "operate to forestall considerations of possible alternatives to war and peace".

– I reflect –

After watching Kirby Dick's documentary *The Invisible War* (2012) about sexual assault in the United States military, I started to realise that most (academic) mainstream IR journals are largely silent on gender, the military and war. Even though gender and war are occasionally covered, gender still appeared to be segregated from the questions that most war scholars investigate. A few questions troubled my mind.

How did gender stereotypes become embedded in academic debates, warfare and at the policy level? Can the challenges that gender mainstreaming faces be traced to the way the media portray the military, conflict and gender? Are women and men differently affected by war because of their roles, status, needs or access to power? Why do we believe women are less violent than men? Is it true that women are less violent than men? What are the causal links between gender justice and causes of war? What drives (or hinders) gender mainstreaming? How does gender and war fit into the nature and nurture debate?

With the abuses of detainees in Abu Ghraib and Lynndie England taking centre stage in medial reporting and in the public, it seemed appropriate to analyse the case and try to find some answers.

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