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Can women share the honour when honour has historically kept women away from frontline combat?

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Abstract

On Anzac Day, a day when many of my colleagues will be writing about the crucial issue of the place of indigenous Australians in commemorations of war, I will reflect on another issue, the role of gender in war. In particular, I will look at how emotional regimes, specifically honour codes, have been constructed to keep women away from frontline combat.

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Can Women Share the Honour when Honour has Historically Kept

Women Away from Frontline Combat?

On Anzac Day, a day when many of my colleagues will be writing about the crucial issue of the place of indigenous Australians in commemorations of war, I will reflect on another issue, the role of gender in war. In particular, I will look at how emotional regimes, specifically honour codes, have been constructed to keep women away from frontline combat.

Following the Australian Returned and Services League's (RSL) decision to place women at the front of this year's Anzac Day parade through Sydney, the *Sunday Telegraph* published a brief article featuring military veteran, Kellie Dadds (15 April 2018). Dadds spent 22 years in the Australian army, many of those in Afghanistan and Iraq. The article, entitled 'We Can All Share the Honour', detailed the treatment Dadds tended to receive when she wore her service medals on Anzac Day. Well-meaning people, she said, would tell her that only military veterans wore their medals on the left chest. The assumption was that she was a descendant of a veteran who should be wearing her grandfather's medals on the right.

Gender was the determining factor here. Dadds said that she knew hundreds, if not thousands of women who experienced similar incidents. Women, the article explained, had felt excluded from past Anzac Day marches. Either they were

representatives of a military that until recent decades had not deployed women for overseas missions and therefore they were not classified as veterans or, even if they had been deployed for overseas service, they were taken for descendants of male veterans. The newspaper piece focused on the RSL's recent redefinition of veteran from those returned from overseas deployment to anyone who had served in the Australian Defence Force and had been honourably or medically discharged, an act which substantially expanded the number of women now classified as veterans. The article ended with an older service woman who had not been able to serve overseas making the comment that it was important to ensure that today's female veterans are recognised: 'It's a way for us older women to honour young veterans, but also show that there is still a sisterhood.'

Gendered Honour Codes

The word 'honour' is key here. It is also key in the title – 'We Can All Share the Honour'. The article connects military women to the notion of honour yet, historically, women have been excluded from military roles, especially frontline combat, because they have been deemed to exist beyond the reach of the honour codes that traditionally guide men's actions in the field of battle. In my chapter on 'The Shame of the Violent Woman' in *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash* [<https://www.routledge.com/Shame-and-the-Anti-Feminist-Backlash-Britain-Ireland-and-Australia-1890-1920/Crozier-De-Rosa/p/book/9780415635868>], I elaborated on the gendered nature of honour and its ties with violence.

'Historically, the masculine domain of violence was policed by honour codes. The profound association that honour maintained with masculinity means that 'males, overwhelmingly, have been the chief antagonists in violence inflicted in its name' [<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/honour-violence-and-emotions-in-history-9781472519498/>]. *Indeed, in many instances, masculine resort to violence was considered not only honourable but also essential. In some societies—those with*

pronounced ideas about honour and shame—men remaining passive in violent situations was viewed as *'a cardinal feminine virtue'* [<https://www.amazon.com/Men-Violence-Rituals-America-Criminal/dp/0814207537>]. For example, in many European cultures it was deemed unmanly not to react aggressively to personal insults. Although masculine honour codes changed over time, they continued to denote the capacity for violence to be a manly trait—an integral aspect of masculine identity. Violence offered men the opportunity of proving their gender identity. Rules were intended to govern men's violent engagements with each other. Honour codes directed men to fight fairly and courageously. Honour, then, inspired many men's public acts of violence, and it also guided their participation in those acts.

Women's exclusion from male cultures of violence is partially explained by their exclusion from honour codes. Women were not permitted to assume an active relationship with honour and its codes. However, they were not entirely absent from those codes. A passive function was conferred on women through the notion of chivalry, an integral aspect of honour codes. Honour codes directed men to be chivalrous in their behaviour towards women or to correct the attitudes of those men who rejected such chivalry. Historically, chivalry incorporated a broad set of cultural norms. The elevation of honour above all virtues, the promotion of strict sex roles subordinating women, and class limits were chief among these. Chivalry regulated honour violence. Women could not earn honour through physical violence or martial prowess. Consequently, woman's place was in the home. *The public world, guided as it was by men's violence and martial codes of honour, was too dangerous for the female sex.'*

(<https://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1299&context=bglj>)

Opposition to Female Combatants

Women who advocated that they pick up arms to fight – for example, for the nation – challenged the masculine nature of violence and of the honour codes that regulated men's actions in the sphere of combat. As such, they often invited

severe criticism from those keenly attuned to the need to protect the sometimes precarious relationship between honour, violence, and masculinity. In World War One, for instance, patriotic British women who proposed the induction of female combatants met with vehement opposition. Members of the politically conservative body, the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage (NLOWS), said that ‘Great Britain would not be making a contribution to the cause of civilisation when she pressed her women into any other form of military service than that of Red Cross work’ (1915). Through the League’s paper, the *Anti-Suffrage Review*, they continued: If women were to propose enacting physical force on the international stage, then international codes of chivalry would be brought under scrutiny.

‘Such a kicking against the limits imposed by nature and by civilization can only result in one of two alternatives: either these military women will be shot and bayoneted by the enemy, or they will take advantage of their sex so as to put the enemy’s soldiers into an unfair and impossible position, at any rate until the unnatural behaviour of such amazons has driven international usage to reconsider and revise its code of chivalry (1915).’

Men would be required to enact violence on women’s bodies, instead of protecting women from male acts of aggression. If Britain fielded women soldiers in the international war, the NLOWS argued, then German soldiers would be justified in thinking that their enemies were beyond the pale of civilisation.

At the time, opposition to women combatants and opposition to the woman vote were intertwined, as demonstrated by this passage from my ‘The Shame of the Violent Woman’ chapter which discusses renowned anti-suffragist, Sir Almroth E. Wright’s plea to the House of Lords to oppose female suffrage. Wright

‘invoked shocking images of male-female violence—of ‘men and women shooting each other down and falling upon each other with bayonets’ and ‘of the female body shot and run-through’. He went further to include the pregnant body in his

repertoire of bloody and violent imagery. There surge into the mind 'visions also of the possibility of women soldiers fighting and killed in a condition of pregnancy; and worst nightmares' (1918). The woman's body as a sight of reproduction, life, and nurture was glaringly incongruous with the deadly intent of the battlefield.'

What is significant about this is that it –

'was not the wrong done to female bodies that Wright was most worried about but rather the impact that these visions would have on the masculine mind. Such images of male-on-female violence may be dismissed as romanticised, he said, as fantastical. However, he added, 'it would, without doubt, be arguable that their appeal is to the sentimental masculine, rather than to the matter-of-fact feminine intellect'. It was men's emotional regimes that violent women threatened to invade at the same time that they altered their own. To allow women to exercise physical force—surely an appendage of the vote—was to make both sexes subject to the same moral law. To do so, then, would be to instil in women the idea that 'it is moral and reputable of her to resort to the weapon of force'. It is to invite her to use violence against men. Yet, civilisation, he added, relied on it 'being maintained as a settled moral principle between the sexes that neither shall turn against the other the weapon of physical compulsion'. Again, however, Wright returned to the matter of masculine emotional regimes. To allow or ask woman to use violence against the male body would be to ask him to transform his entire way of thinking and being. Wright posited that asking women to alter their emotional make-up was significant but that it was 'an even greater matter' to instruct men to do so because that involved going 'to work to uproot out of man's mind the instinctive feeling that it is culpable to use physical force against woman. And it is to make bad blood in man's heart against woman and in woman's heart against man' (1918).'

The irrevocable disordering of honour codes brought about by the female combatant would be to the detriment of both sexes. It would, however, have a more negative impact on men for what codes would now direct men's relations with each other?

Can Women Share in the Honour?

Renowned historian of honour, Robert Nye, has argued that feminist advancement throughout modernity forced honour codes to retreat into the back rooms of men's only societies. Whether this is accurate or not, in *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash*, I argue that early twentieth-century feminists – including those who advocated women using physical force for political purposes – did not demand the withdrawal of heavily masculinised codes. Rather they argued that such codes could be opened up to include women; they could be un-gendered. Public forms of honour could be within women's reach. Women could engage in combat then because they understood and were subject to codes of honour.

The title of the *Telegraph's* article, 'We Can All Share the Honour', illustrates that this is still a familiar plea today.