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# The (Mis)Use of Ideal Masculinity in Armed Conflicts

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the concept of ideal masculinity in the context of armed conflicts and analyses its relationship with actual forms of masculinity. The paper aims to present the content of the socio-culturally shaped ideal of masculinity during wartime and explain how such an ideal impacts the lives of men affected by armed conflicts. Through a review of relevant literature from feminist theories of international security and masculinity studies, the paper highlights the discrepancy between ideals and reality, drawing attention to the negative consequences stemming from that gap. Namely, unable to meet the demands of ideal masculinity, men face frustration and pressure to become more violent than they would be, in order to conform to societal expectations. In conclusion, the paper emphasises the need for further research into this domain and the deconstruction of militarised masculinity with an ultimate aim to establish more inclusive perceptions of masculinity so that the majority of men can benefit from such a perception change.

*Keywords:* ideal masculinity, militarised masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, armed conflicts, feminism, gender studies

## The (Mis)Use of Ideal Masculinity in Armed Conflicts

### Introduction

Traditional theories of international security, such as realism and liberalism, have overlooked the gender aspect of security, focusing on the security of political entities, primarily states and international organisations. Feminists have criticised this approach, warning that it perpetuates the *status quo* — the dominant position of men and the male value system in global politics. They believe that such a value system, based on relations of competition and domination, constitutes a fundamental source of tension and global insecurity (Elshtain, 1987; Enloe, 1990; Tickner, 1992). Traditional theories obscure the specific position of women — a position in which they have little influence over global affairs but must live with their consequences (Tickner, 1992). As a solution, feminists propose the deconstruction of gender roles and a shift in focus from depersonalised relations between states to the personal experiences of women, especially those affected by war-related devastations. This school of thought is part of a broader process of increasing the global visibility of women's positions and can be assumed to have had a positive impact on the development of a series of international documents aimed at improving the status of women, such as the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the 2000 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 — Women, Peace, and Security.

However, the deconstruction of gender roles requires a consideration of men's personal experiences as well. Their experience of armed conflicts is closely tied to perceptions of ideal masculinity that dictate how a *proper* man should behave. Academic literature has not adequately addressed the male experience of war. Topics such as sexual violence against men in war or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in war veterans are not prominent in mainstream literature. While one of the fundamental principles of feminism is that the patriarchal system

constrains both women and men, gender security studies have not extensively discussed the security of men as a gender group.

With this paper, I aim to shed light on one aspect of men's security in war. The analysis provided illuminates the relationship between, on the one hand, social norms regarding the behaviour of the *ideal* man in war and, on the other hand, the wartime experiences of actual men. Therefore, the paper addresses two crucial questions. First, *how does society envision the ideal man in war?* Second, *how do real men experience war?*

The paper's main thesis is that a significant gap between the ideal and reality exists, which leads to insatiable frustration for men affected by the ravages of war. Throughout history, social norms have set a high standard for ideal masculinity, where a man is expected to be both an ideal citizen and an ideal warrior simultaneously (Nye, 2007). The inability to attain the ideal of a perfect warrior is perceived as a weakness in a patriarchal society. Consequently, men become victims of both war and the stringent social norms imposed upon them. By imposing the model of ideal masculinity, society turns men into *cannon fodder*, leaving them with two options: striving to achieve the ideal of the *warrior-man* or experiencing frustration due to the impossibility of attaining that ideal.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is important to note two clarifications regarding crucial concepts. Firstly, although discussions exist in the literature regarding the distinction between the concepts of *war* and *armed conflict* (Metz & Cuccia, 2011, p. 13), in this paper, these two terms will be used interchangeably and broadly, referring to organised violent conflicts between state or non-state actors to achieve political objectives. Secondly, the concept of ideal masculinity in this paper can be understood in the sense of the concept of *hegemonic masculinity* introduced by the author Raewyn Connell. Connell (2005) introduces this concept to describe the kind of masculinity that is most desirable in a given society and that contributes to maintaining male dominance within it. However, in this paper, the usage of the term *ideal masculinity* aims to make the disparity between this type of masculinity and the real experiences of men in war even more conspicuous.

For the purposes of this paper, a systematic literature review was conducted to analyse the difference between ideal masculinity and its real manifestations in the context of armed conflicts. The first step involved identifying relevant literature sources that address the gender aspect of international security. Care was taken to include both theoretical and empirical research in this field. The literature selected was primarily in English and spanned from the late 1980s to the present, predominantly from countries in the global North. This was done due to the larger volume and easier accessibility of Western literature. Still, the underlying methodological limitation should be acknowledged as such a literature choice might lack the direct perspective of the global South, where contemporary armed conflicts predominantly occur.

Additionally, it should be noted that the consulted literature falls broadly within the domain of social constructivism. This is a direct consequence of the fact that the collective interests of men and women in the international sphere remain beyond the scope of traditional theories of international security, such as realism and liberalism.

After collecting relevant literature, a content analysis was conducted, a process that involved identifying common themes, theories, and findings, as well as tracing their interconnections. During the analysis, argumentation was developed as the basis for a claim about a gap between ideal and real masculinities during wartime. A critical approach and the cross-utilisation of different sources allowed for highlighting relevant examples to better understand this complex phenomenon.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

Gender, as a specific social category, became relevant for international security studies only with the emergence of social constructivism. Constructivism is based on the idea that reality is not objectively given but is created by communities through norms, values, and identity (Fierke, 2016, pp. 162-163). Constructivism has thus empowered many social groups to *create* a new reality from their perspective. By presenting social phenomena from previously

unrepresented perspectives, marginalised social groups gained the opportunity to influence values, norms, and identities and take a step towards a more desirable reality for them.

Among the schools that have evolved from social constructivism, gender and related feminist theories are the most significant. Cynthia Enloe (2007) distinguishes between gender and feminist analysis by noting that the former examines how masculine and feminine gender roles are formed and what they entail, while the latter explores power relations built on such shaped gender identities (p. 100). From this, it can be concluded that gender theory is the foundational basis, with feminist theory aspiring to greater societal engagement. However, both gender and feminist approaches have been met with indifference by the established field of international security studies. Realists and liberals have preferred to ignore feminist criticism rather than engage in discussion with it. The discipline of international relations has thus been declared "one of the most gender-blind, indeed crudely patriarchal, of all the institutionalised forms of contemporary social and political analysis" (Walker, 1992, p. 179).

Indeed, feminism criticised traditional schools of international security for the absence of representation of the female experience. Feminists argued that the entire discipline of international relations was developed by exclusively considering male experience. From the outset, the central themes of the discipline focused on areas of society where women were traditionally suppressed – politics, the military, diplomacy, and statesmanship. Liberals and realists completely disregarded the personal experiences of women who, devoid of any political and military positions, did not influence the security challenges but whose consequences they directly felt.

As a result, feminists believed in the reconstruction of the discipline of international relations with an aim for the study to include the personal experiences of women. "The personal is international; the international is personal", proclaimed Enloe in her seminal work "Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics" (2014, p. 343), abolishing the artificial divide between the public and private spheres of international affairs. Enloe embraced

constructivist logic and demonstrated how global politics and individuals' personal experiences mutually constitute each other. Therefore, feminism sought to influence a change in reality through a paradigm shift; thinking less state-centrally about international security and more in the context of the security of the most vulnerable populations would be a step towards creating a safer world. Since then, numerous monographs and papers have been written to illuminate the position of women in the international security system, particularly women affected by the ravages of war.<sup>1</sup> The results of feminist efforts are evident in the increasing number of international and national<sup>2</sup> documents aiming to improve the security of women and girls.

On the other hand, feminism, despite being based on the argument that the patriarchal system constrains both women and men, has not sufficiently addressed the personal experiences of men affected by armed conflicts. While feminists demonstrate that traditional schools have been constructed from a male perspective since their inception (Jones, 1996), it is important not to overlook that they did not necessarily give voice to the entire male gender. They often focused on the experiences of a small privileged subset of men, such as statesmen and military leaders, who had the power to impose their values from the top down.

Striving to avoid the trap of generalising all men, certain feminist currents have delved into a more nuanced examination of masculinity, challenging stereotypes about men as a gender. This new branch of research can be labelled as masculinity studies or men's studies, with

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<sup>1</sup> In 1995, Jean Bethke Elshtain published the monograph *Women and War*, where she analysed the female experiences of war. Subsequently, research on the same topic emerged, but focusing on specific armed conflicts. Included in this research are monographs such as *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina* by Marie E. Berry (2018) and *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* by Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt (2009).

<sup>2</sup> In the case of Serbia, the most important national documents addressing the gender dimension of human rights and women's security include the Law on Gender Equality, the Gender Equality Strategy for the period 2021-2030, and the Strategy for the Prevention and Suppression of Gender-Based Violence and Violence in the Family for the period 2021-2025.

some of the most significant contributors being Raewyn Connell, Michael Kimmel, and Eric Anderson. However, it is crucial to distinguish between masculinity studies and the so-called men's rights movements that emerged in the West in the 1970s. Men's rights movements arose as a political response to new social movements, such as feminism or the queer movement, seeking to maintain the dominant position of men. As such, men's rights movements leaned on sociobiological theories and sought singular, essential male qualities. On the other hand, masculinity studies have a completely different starting point. Grounded in the acceptance of gender as a socially constructed category, masculinity studies aim to portray different forms of masculinity and make the concept of masculinity as inclusive as possible for anyone assigned male at birth or identifying as a man (see more in: Yaeger, 2019).

This article could be classified within the framework of masculinity studies as its goal is to uncover the tension between ideal and more common forms of masculinity, shedding light on how this discrepancy produces frustrations for men in armed conflicts. However, as it is not possible to precisely delineate where feminism ends, and masculinity studies begin, it is clear that this article heavily relies on feminist findings. Moreover, it is written in the spirit of feminist conviction that a safer world is achieved by shifting the focus from depersonalised state relations to the study of the private sphere.

### **Idealised Masculinity in Wartime**

The relationship between masculinity and militarism is not biological but socially constructed. Feminist literature has clearly pointed out that the association of men with aggression and women with peacefulness stems from historical circumstances and is not genetically based (see: Tickner, 1992; Goldstein, 2001). In reality, there are many women who are more prone to aggression than men, and vice versa. However, over time, society has imposed a gendered division of labour. The role of the protector of the family, and in a broader sense, society and the state, has been assigned to men. This is partially biologically based because women have limited ability for physical combat during



pregnancy, while after childbirth, they are also bound to newborns who cannot survive without their presence. Additionally, the fact that men are, on average, physically stronger than women has contributed to the perception of men as protectors and the construction of gender roles based on that (Ferguson, 2021).

Blanchard (2014) emphasises that ideal masculinity in peacetime can have various variations. Some of the models include the rational economic man, the breadwinner, the financial risk-taker, etc. (p. 63). However, during wartime, all men are expected to become warrior-men. In this way, militarised masculinity takes on the role of ideal masculinity. Recognising the significance of military power in safeguarding sovereignty and national interests, nation-states actively endorse the concept of the warrior-man. This encouragement aims to inspire more men to aspire to this ideal, fostering a readiness to actively engage in defending proclaimed national interests. Such construction of masculinity is crucial for maintaining violence in international relations (Eichler, 2014, p. 81).

Militarised masculinity imposes significant expectations on men. The envisioned warrior-man is not only physically strong but also demonstrates courage and determination in battle. He is patriotic and constantly aware of the imperative to protect his family and homeland. He is loyal to the nation and the army and is ready to assist his comrades. Mondini (2014) explores the development of narratives about World War I in Italy and highlights the most prevalent elements in texts written in honour of fallen war veterans. Dominant motifs include self-sacrifice, military brotherhood, the metaphor of the army as a family, and the glorification of leaving the comfort of a previous life. Young soldiers, recent high school graduates or university students, abandon their previous comfortable lives and only then, in the face of the harshness of the world, become real men (p. 307). Militarised masculinity prohibits cowardice, desertion, vulnerability, or other (broadly defined) weaknesses of the human spirit. On the other hand, the model of militarised masculinity pays little attention to the ethical aspects of the warrior-man's behaviour towards the opposing side. Although the idealised man is, in principle, expected to be just and

conscientious, these virtues are not peremptory outside his own community (Acheson, 2022, p. 29). Conversely, aggression, cruelty, and a desire for revenge against the opposing side are tolerated. Such militarised masculinity can be attributed to the conditions necessary for mass war crimes throughout history and today.

Militarised masculinity has proven to be a phenomenon highly resistant to time, persisting through a "gender-specific process of socialisation" (Bilinović, 2016, p. 321). It is transmitted transgenerationally through various mediums, with the educational system and popular culture playing crucial roles.

In primary and secondary education, history lessons serve as a powerful tool for instilling masculine values. Traditionally, the study of history has focused extensively on military and political history, domains largely shaped by men. As women were historically relegated to the private sphere, their historical experiences are often downgraded to mere supplementary boxes and footnotes in history textbooks. Despite societal changes in recent decades that have contributed to improving the status of women, Hucks (2021) argues that many boys in contemporary educational systems are still encouraged to be tough, strong, and devoid of emotions. On the other hand, girls are taught to be charming, gentle, emotional, and passive. The socialisation that students undergo in school prepares them for a world where the model of militarised masculinity is acceptable or even desirable.

Popular culture also abounds in the romanticisation of the ideal militarised masculinity. Through movies, television series, video games, and other media, heroes can be encountered who personify the unattainable ideal of the warrior man. Hollywood blockbusters feature protagonists portrayed by actors with hypermasculine appearances, such as Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger. The focus is on the strength, courage, and determination of these heroes that enable them to survive apocalyptic situations. Simultaneously, these heroes wouldn't be as successful without the support and camaraderie of other similar men – their brothers in adversity (Sparks, 1996, pp. 356-357). The same holds true for video games. Blackburn and Scharrer (2019) demonstrate that both men and women who frequently engage in violent

video games are more likely to internalise a view of masculinity that involves aggression, competition, dominance, and the suppression of emotions.

## **Actual Masculinity in Wartime**

At the reception of a mobilisation call, the majority of men are not happy to go to war and face a range of moral dilemmas and ethical conflicts. On the one hand, there is a desire to preserve their current way of life and stay with their families, while on the other hand, the organised state apparatus, supported by societal norms, insists that participation in war is a patriotic duty. While some men (such as professional soldiers, mercenaries, and volunteers) find various motives to go to war, there is a considerable number of men who try to find a formal reason to be exempt from war. Some also resort to desertion or corrupt officials to help them evade military service. For example, in the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is not uncommon for wealthier men to have the possibility to pay a monthly fee for non-participation in the war (BBC, 2023). Additionally, in just the first six months of the Russian aggression on Ukraine, 6,400 Ukrainian men were arrested for attempting to leave the country illegally (Chastand, 2022).

Certainly, even if they do not participate in armed combat, civilian men and deserters experience the traumatic consequences of war, often facing condemnation from the community. However, men who directly engage in war, bearing arms, are additionally exposed to profound traumas stemming from the specific way of life on the front lines. Witnessing pervasive suffering, these men form the belief that life has little or easily loses its value. Death becomes a routine occurrence. They develop emotional numbness towards it and gradually accept death as a new normalcy (Brewis, 2008). Also, before and during the duration of military actions, there is a noticeable general dehumanising view of the enemy forces. Men on the opposite side of the war trench are perceived as embodiments of evil. The act of killing the enemy becomes a sterile act and is seen as a means to achieve a higher purpose (Smith, 2016). This kind of dehumanisation of the enemy further deepens the emotional

numbness of the warriors, creating a significant emotional detachment from the tragic consequences of their actions.

Traumatic experiences during war may linger in the lives of men long after the conclusion of armed conflicts. A significant number of war veterans lack the capacity to process the horrors they faced during the war, leading to long-term reactions to trauma and stress. Moreover, some of them suffer from very serious mental disorders such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the U.S. National Center for PTSD, 7% of war veterans develop this disorder at some point in their lives, but the percentage varies depending on the specific wartime conflict in which the veterans participated. For instance, 29% of veterans from U.S. military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan struggle with PTSD (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.). Unfortunately, military systems worldwide discourage soldiers from openly discussing the frightening war experiences and their mental health consequences (Blanchard, 2014, p. 68). As still strictly patriarchal organisations with a hypermasculine value system, military institutions rest on the belief that shedding light on all the negative aspects of war would contribute to tarnishing the reputation of the military and deconstructing carefully crafted myths about the ideal, strong warrior-man, who is not only physically but also mentally robust.

One of the most brutal deviations in soldiers' behaviour during the war is mass rapes, with women and girls being the most common victims. The international community, recognising this issue, has adopted documents addressing the protection of women's rights and the prevention of sexual violence during armed conflicts, but the results of these efforts are still inadequate. The reason for this lies in the normalisation of such acts among soldiers in wartime conditions. While rape may sometimes be an organised strategy, more often, it is a war practice that is not officially endorsed but is tolerated (Wood, 2018). Baz and Stern (Baaz & Stern, 2009) state that the crime of rape is normalised because it serves as a means to satisfy the frustration arising from the inability to achieve the ideal of the hypermasculine warrior-man. The average soldier during war grapples with feelings of inferiority because they cannot meet the demands of militarised masculinity. Most

men do not have impeccable physical appearances or fitness, while feelings of fear and discomfort set them apart from the fearless ideal warrior-man. To compensate for these shortcomings, frustrated soldiers resort to rape as a simple but monstrous way to feel powerful.

It is essential to emphasise that men are not exclusively perpetrators but often victims of sexual violence as well. Soldiers not only rape women but also other men, usually among the ranks of war prisoners or the civilian population. Schulz (2021) explains that sexual violence against men cannot be explained by sexual impulse or pleasure. On the contrary, the dominant motive for violence is the desire to completely humiliate the opponent. In these cases, the ingrained misogynistic logic comes to the fore, where the sexual perpetrator identifies with a powerful man, and the victim is feminised. The perpetrator believes that the opponent is utterly defeated because not only did he lose on the battlefield, but he also lost his masculinity (p. 43). Unlike female victims, who are encouraged to speak about their traumas after the conflict, resulting in numerous studies, men rarely choose to discuss the rape they experienced. The lack of willingness can be interpreted as a fear of stigmatisation because men might be criticised for physical weakness and an inability to defend themselves. Fear is also intertwined with the likelihood that victims in conservative societies could easily be labelled as homosexuals *who provoked the incidents themselves*. Additionally, in countries where homosexuality is punishable, victims face a real danger of persecution (2021, p. 40).

After the end of the war, soldiers must go through the process of reintegrating into civilian life. The social reintegration process is very demanding and multidimensional, and for the veterans themselves, it is long and painful. War conflicts leave behind economic and infrastructural destruction, significantly complicating the resolution of pressing issues for war veterans, such as finding employment or addressing housing problems. The situation is particularly complex for veterans who have suffered serious physical injuries and acquired disabilities during the war. In addition to the lack of adequate healthcare in a war-impooverished health system, disabled veterans also struggle with emotional and psychological issues, including a sense of helplessness, depression, and

anxiety due to the loss of physical independence and inevitable changes in the quality of life (Elnitsky, Fisher & Blevins, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has analysed the deep gap between the constructed ideal of masculinity imposed by societal norms and the reality of the male experience of war. It has demonstrated how, in a patriarchal historical context, societal norms were created to set high standards for what it means to be a man. Expectations and pressure have been placed on men to show fearlessness, dominance, physical strength, and a readiness for risk in battle, regardless of the fact that only a negligible fraction of men hold the power to decide on war and peace.

Faced with the harsh realities of war, men realise that actual war is not an epic novel, film, or video game, and the majority begins to feel fear and the senselessness of war. The inability to reach the ideal of the warrior-man produces frustration, and attempts to overcome this frustration, or the search for a sense of virtuous masculinity, often result in uncontrolled aggression towards the weaker and mass war crimes. A significant number of men carry traumatic memories long after the conflict has ended, and for some, PTSD emerges as a serious mental condition.

All of this points to the need for significant efforts to deconstruct militarised masculinity. The existing findings from masculinity studies provide a good starting point, but deeper interdisciplinary qualitative research on the experiences of war veterans is necessary to understand the phenomenon from various perspectives. Additionally, theory must be accompanied by relevant practice. Feminist organisations need to find ways to more effectively reach men and demonstrate the relevance of their research in this context. Of course, these efforts would represent only the first steps in the complex process of building a safer society where the ideal of masculinity is separated from aggression and violence.

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## **(Zlo)upotreba idealnog maskuliniteta u oružanim sukobima**

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### **Sažetak**

Ovaj rad istražuje koncept idealnog maskuliniteta u kontekstu oružanih sukoba i analizira njegov odnos sa stvarnim oblicima maskuliniteta. Cilj rada je da predstavi sadržaj sociokulturno oblikovanog ideala maskuliniteta u ratnom periodu i objasni kako takav ideal utiče na živote muškaraca zahvaćenih ratnim zbivanjima. Kroz pregled relevantne literature iz feminističke teorije međunarodne bezbednosti i studija maskuliniteta, rad ukazuje na raskorak između ideala i stvarnosti, te skreće pažnju na negativne posledice koje proističu iz takvog raskoraka. U nemogućnosti da dosegnu zahteve idealnog maskuliniteta, muškarci se suočavaju sa frustracijom i pritiskom da budu nasilniji nego što jesu kako bi odgovarali očekivanjima društva. Na kraju, rad naglašava potrebu za daljim istraživanjem ove oblasti i dekonstrukcijom militarizovanog maskuliniteta u cilju uspostavljanja inkluzivnijih predstava o muškosti i ostvarivanja dobrobiti koju bi time stekla većina muškaraca.

*Ključne reči:* idealni maskulinitet, militarizovani maskulinitet, hegemoni maskulinitet, oružani sukobi, feminizam, studije roda