

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Anything you can do [I can do better]: Exploring women's agency and gendered protection in state militaries

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Abstract

Women who are currently serving in a variety of combat roles and combat support positions in many state militaries around the globe have had to struggle for their positions by proving their abilities, and such struggles are still ongoing. Based on interview materials with veterans, this article examines the ways in which the veterans interpret their roles as women in combat positions and how they understand agency. The article further traces how their presence in war could alter the gendered meaning of protection. While the military is a key institution of overt gendered power in the state, women combatants' voices can create a crack in the masculine dominance that is taken for granted in state narratives; they can also create a wedge that allows in a reconsideration of gendered roles and power relations in the context of militaries, thereby offering more nuanced interpretations of protection and agency.

Keywords: agency; combat; gender; Israel Defense Forces (IDF); military; protection

Introduction

Ahuva is a veteran combatant who completed her mandatory military service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) six years prior to our conversation. When I asked her 'what is the first association or thought that comes into your mind when you think about your military service?', her answer was prompt and without hesitation: 'Satisfaction, pride; I am so proud that I did all this. Wow, I am a combatant, I can do anything, I can handle anything; it shaped my life. I am strong. Even now, years later, I can handle problems instantly and do ten things at once.'¹ Later in the interview, she described in detail her service, her role as a combatant, and the ways in which she had protected the state and promoted national security. Nonetheless, she also admitted that, like some of her male peers, she still suffers from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and various other mental and physical difficulties that derive from her time as a combatant. She expressed disappointment that she had had to end her service a few months ahead of schedule due to an injury. Nonetheless, she still views herself as having been the strongest, fiercest, and most appropriate person for her role as well as a strong feminist woman.

A few months after my conversation with Ahuva, Lieutenant General Aviv Kochavi, the then IDF Chief of the General Staff, was asked in a closed forum why fewer women had been promoted to top military ranks since his appointment; to this question, he replied: 'I need the best and the

¹Personal interview with the author, 2020.

most committed candidates in order to win future wars.² This quote was leaked to and published in a daily newspaper. One could assume that his answer implied that women are not able, or not sufficiently committed, to win the next war, or to protect the state – as men do – or even worse, one could conclude that the presence of more women in high-ranking roles in the military would jeopardise national security. Blocking women's promotions and expressing doubts about their commitment and abilities is clearly not unique to the IDF. Throughout the world, there is an intensive struggle between military leaders like Kochavi and those who believe in equality and strive to place more women in combat roles, especially in upper ranks in militaries (the IDF included) and other masculine-dominated organisations.³

Against the background of such contrasting perspectives as those of Kochavi and Ahuva about the role of gender in war and based on interview materials with women in combat roles, the current article addresses two distinct – but intertwined – topics, namely, the agency of women filling combat and combat-related roles in the military and the concept of gendered protection. A dominant motif in women's relationship with the military places women in need of the protection of a male-dominated military.^{4,5} This narrative indirectly presumes that women lack agency and/or the ability to protect themselves, not to mention protecting others.

In research on armed conflicts and militarisation, feminist contributors to Security Studies take a different point of departure from the above narrative of mainstream scholars.^{6,7,8} When examining the process of normalising the militarisation of societies and states, in both local and global politics, feminists tend to inquire how militarisation, as a security practice, has become a part of sense-making in the everyday. Moreover, feminist and critical scholars often feel uncomfortable when discussing, or interacting with, women who engage in violence, particularly state violence.^{9,10} Individuals and scholars who consider themselves feminists are usually associated with anti-militarist perspectives, perhaps even pacifism, and openly prefer peaceful acts to the use of violence and militarism. Hence, the presence of women in the military, especially in militaries engaged in constant violent struggles and violent actions against non-state actors and civilians, are a source of uneasiness among some feminist scholars: in the eyes of these feminist scholars, the increasing number of women who engage in violence moves states away from the implementation of feminist policy. Nonetheless, one should not forget that both states and feminist scholars are divided on the question of the meaning of women's participation in the military. Some scholars hold that the entry of women soldiers into combat roles challenges hegemonic masculine norms and should be seen as an important pillar of gender equality – one of the foundations of several streams in feminism.^{11,12} But other (anti-militarist) feminists fiercely criticise the struggle for equal participation

²Yaniv Kubovich, 'Fewer women promoted to top military brass since Chief of Staff Kochavi appointed', *Haaretz* (18 February 2021), available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-israeli-army-fails-to-put-women-in-senior-ranks-since-chief-of-staff-s-appointment-1.9547773>.

³An interesting aside is that several months after that newspaper article was published, following massive criticism on the part of the public, a few women were promoted to high-ranking – but non-combat – positions in the IDF.

⁴Jean Bethke Elstain, *Women and War* (New York: New York University Press, 1987).

⁵Laura Sjoberg, 'Agency, militarized femininity and enemy others: Observations from the war in Iraq', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 9:1 (2007), pp. 82–101.

⁶Linda Åhäll, 'The dance of militarisation: A feminist security studies take on "the political"', *Critical Studies on Security*, 4:2 (2016), pp. 154–68.

⁷Maya Eichler, 'Learning from the Deschamps Report: Why military and veteran researchers ought to pay attention to gender', *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 2:1 (2016), pp. 5–8.

⁸Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2000).

⁹Harmonie Toros, 'Terrorists, scholars and ordinary people: Confronting terrorism studies with field experiences', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:2 (2008), pp. 279–92.

¹⁰Shir Daphna-Tekoah and Ayelet Harel-Shalev, 'Beyond binaries: Analysing violent state actors in Critical Studies', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10:2 (2017), pp. 253–73.

¹¹April Carter, 'Should women be soldiers or pacifists?', *Peace Review*, 8:3 (1996), pp. 331–5.

¹²Rebecca H. Best, Kyleanne Hunter, and Katherine Hendricks Thomas, 'Fighting for a seat at the table: Women's military service and political representation', *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7:2 (2021), pp. 19–33.

in the military, arguing that women's participation in the military (however manifested) merely legitimises an institution that is antithetical to the goals of feminism. Furthermore, many feminist scholars hold that, while military service for women might promote gender equality, it also involves the militarisation of women's lives and positions them on the frontline of making war and causing violence.

Yet other feminist thinkers are moving away from binary positions on war and gender. Sylvester, for example, conceptualises war as experience, thereby producing a myriad of questions about the nature of such experience.¹³ Eichler,¹⁴ with the aim of moving beyond this binary – to integrate into the military or not – rightly suggests that today's 'feminist scholarship goes beyond earlier feminist debates that were polarized between advocating for women's "right to fight" and opposing women's co-optation into militarism. Today's generation of feminist scholars is engaged in the daunting task of critiquing, and even opposing, militaries while also engaging with them more deeply than ever.' In this context, the current article explores various narratives about women's presence in combat roles in the Israeli military, as told by women soldiers themselves, and offers alternative and nuanced interpretations of their presence and actions. The analysis of the interviews is informed by the theoretical perspectives of Duncanson and Woodward,¹⁵ who remind us that militaries are crucial in constructing gender and that the task of understanding and questioning the gendered nature of the military is therefore important. Moreover, they warn us that one should be careful about adopting deterministic approaches towards the gender–military nexus that abrogate possibilities for change within military institutions and thus prevent discussions about possibilities of transforming military institutions – both their masculinised ideals of soldiering and their primary purpose as agents of violence. Scholars are increasingly taking more nuanced positions on this issue, which comprises a complex mixture of simultaneous resistance and compliance that characterises women's experiences within state militaries.^{16,17}

Scholars of feminist International Relations (IR) have taken the line that there is a necessity for critical engagement with state narratives and actions. Open and inclusive feminist-inspired dialogue provides fertile ground for theorising the significance of local stories and experiences in the making of feminist policy, including the lived experiences of women and other marginalised groups.¹⁸ Based on the theoretical foundation of feminist IR, one should then ask: could the stories of women in the military, such as those told by Ahuva and her peers, become part of this knowledge? Could women's stories about their military experiences, serving as 'state agents', also be considered as a representation of a feminist stance? Could these stories represent an indispensable part of state discourse? What can they teach us about agency and protection? The interview materials presented in this study assist us to look into these questions.

These questions, by their very nature, will also be informed by UN Security Council Resolution 1325,¹⁹ which recognises women's right to participate as decision-makers at all levels in conflict

¹³Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁴Maya Eichler, 'Gender and the Canadian armed forces: Does change mean feminist progress?', *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, & Social Justice*, 41:2 (2020), pp. 3–8 (p. 7).

¹⁵Claire Duncanson and Rachel Woodward, 'Regendering the military: Theorizing women's military participation', *Security Dialogue*, 47:1 (2016), pp. 3–21.

¹⁶Orna Sasson-Levy, 'Feminism and military gender practices: Israeli women soldiers in "masculine" roles', *Sociological Inquiry*, 73:3 (2003), pp. 440–65.

¹⁷Duncanson and Woodward, 'Regendering'.

¹⁸Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Annica Kronsell, 'Theorising feminist foreign policy', *International Relations*, 33:1 (2019), pp. 23–39.

¹⁹United Nations Security Council, 'Resolution 1325 (2000)', 31 October 2000. UN doc. no. S/RES/1325, available at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/720/18/PDF/N0072018.pdf?OpenElement>.

prevention, conflict resolution, and peace-building processes.^{20,21,22} In this context, Whitworth warns us that even *peace operations* might not be so peaceful.²³ She claims that peace operations could be considered as advancing an imperialist agenda that reinforces ideas about the Global South being conflict-prone and uncivilised, while diverting our attention from the roots of conflict, which she regards as colonialism and globalisation. Feminists who hold similar perspectives therefore question women's participation in such endeavours, arguing that these endeavours hamper the evolution of ethical policy and lead to militarisation. It is thus not surprising that UNSCR 1325 has led to a renewal of debates around women's participation in the military²⁴ or that it has been followed by additional resolutions in similar vein; for example, the Windhoek Declaration of 2002²⁵ and UNSCR 2538 specifically call for the promotion of women in security agencies and in peacekeeping operations, respectively.²⁶ Should we, then, add to the demand for the inclusion of women in peace talks and peacekeeping operations a call for women's integration into the military in combat roles? Should we add the inclusion of women in offensive operations? In practice, such additions would translate into a call for women's right to be involved in waging war. Such a step of broadening UNSCR 1325 into what could be termed as an 'inclusionary battle', i.e. involving women in offensive projects and in combat roles, remains an issue of some controversy in feminist debate.

Yet another important aspect of this debate is gender equality. Military service, particularly combat service, is often translated into various benefits in civilian life after completion of military service; hence, one could say that integrating women into the military and into combat roles might indeed promote gender equality: why should men alone be eligible for such benefits? Yet one might nevertheless ask: is it a feminist act to demand equal rights in battle? Would such equal rights affect state policy and state narratives and, if so, in what way? To further complicate these questions, Newby and Sebag²⁷ remind us that in the context of national militaries and peacekeeping, one can trace 'the overt recognition women obtain for the unique roles they play in military contexts where gender sensitivity is required; and simultaneously, how the low status of non-combat roles obscures women's visibility and the value of their contribution in national militaries'.

The tools to examine these questions are to be found in feminist IR theories. One of the central aims of feminist IR^{28,29} is to understand empirically – and then to redress – the gender inequalities that often remain hidden or ignored in traditional and male-centric international theory. In line with this goal and in light of the work of Duncanson and Woodward,³⁰ I ask: should we insist on bringing to the forefront of research on security the reality of women serving in combat roles, with emphasis on the potential of this reality to destabilise and challenge norms, concepts, and established knowledge about war and foreign policy? Should we investigate these actors while, at

²⁰ Carol Cohn, 'Mainstreaming gender in UN security policy: A path to political transformation?', in Shirin M. Rai and Georgina Waylen (eds), *Global Governance: Feminist Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 185–206.

²¹ Marie O'Reilly, 'Why women? Inclusive security and peaceful societies' (2015), available at: <https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/why-women-report-2017.pdf>.

²² Sarai B. Aharoni, 'Who needs the women and peace hypothesis? Rethinking modes of inquiry on gender and conflict in Israel/Palestine', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 19:3 (2017), pp. 311–26.

²³ Sandra Whitworth, *Men, Militarism, and UN Peacekeeping: A Gendered Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004).

²⁴ Duncanson and Woodward, 'Regendering'.

²⁵ Windhoek Declaration and Namibia Plan of Action on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Support Operations, United Nations Security Council, A/55/138-S/2000/693, 14 July 2000, 2, available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/wps-s-2000-693.php>.

²⁶ Vanessa F. Newby and Clotilde Sebag, 'Gender sidestreaming? Analysing gender mainstreaming in national militaries and international peacekeeping', *European Journal of International Security*, 6:2 (2021), pp. 148–70.

²⁷ Newby and Sebag, 'Gender', p. 148.

²⁸ J. Ann Tickner, *Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

²⁹ C. Carol Cohn (ed.), *Women and Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

³⁰ Duncanson and Woodward, 'Regendering'.

the same time, acknowledging the consequences of women occupying the role of state actors who are taking part in violence in conflicts and wars?^{31,32,33}

Feminist theories often tend to focus on pacifism while ignoring other possibilities or situations. This article makes room for other voices: listening to the stories told by women who serve in a variety of combat roles around the world could teach us about contradictions within global and local feminist movements as well as about various interpretations of the meaning of ‘feminism’ on the part of both the state and women soldiers themselves. To address questions related to diversity in interpreting the meaning of feminism in IR and its manifestations, the current article thus traces two main elements of changing power relations in society that are closely related to the consequences of women’s integration in combat roles and command roles in the military – *women’s agency* and *gendered protection*.

In keeping with the focus on pacifism, critical scholars and feminists are often drawn to investigating and exploring activists rather than soldiers, since they tend to explore those actors who express resistance and speak up.^{34,35} Perhaps this position might represent wishful thinking on the part of those scholars who want to believe that research participants in feminist studies are always in positions of resisting patriarchy, pointing out injustices (whatever they are), and resisting power. But what about actors and research participants who do not necessarily resist or speak up? How can we identify their perspectives and voices (and perhaps silences)?³⁶ Should we assume a priori that women combatants in the military would resist, confront the system, and speak up? Or should we suggest that an inherent femininity would offer a different voice?

In the Israeli context, Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah³⁷ explored some of these issues by focusing on the double battle faced by women combatants in conflict zones – as soldiers and as women – thereby illustrating the complexities of their status. The women combatants interviewed for their studies described the moral complexities of their service and, in particular, the problematics of serving in a military that controls a civilian population. This complex situation was further complicated by the addition of gender elements. The women in combat roles reported having to face gender stereotypes and sometimes even mockery from their male counterparts. Also in the Israeli context, Lomsky-Feder and Sasson-Levy³⁸ examined the self-silencing mechanism of female combat soldiers. In the current paper, I continue from these points of departure to explore additional elements of women’s experiences in combat roles. With the aim of paying close attention to empirical evidence of women’s experiences, the study is based on interviews, conducted between 2012 and 2023 with 120 women who served as combatants and combat-support soldiers in the IDF (the interviews were conducted after their discharge from active military service, and the study was approved by the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev’s Ethics Committee). Through these interviews, I explore two major elements that are shaking up the gender balance in the state’s socio-political fabric. One relates to the ways in which women express their agency in militarised contexts and present their narratives as state actors, and the other is related to the issue of protection and the ways in which women’s presence in combat roles and new wars is gradually undermining the conventional division of power in terms of protecting vs. being protected. Hence, after a short discussion on the agency of women combatants, this paper will focus mainly on the discourse on protection and ask some new questions, such as: When women are seen as ‘protectors’, does the

³¹ Sjoberg, ‘Agency’.

³² Laura Sjoberg, *Women as Wartime Rapists* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

³³ Ayelet Harel-Shalev and Shir Daphna-Tekoah, *Breaking the Binaries in Security Studies: A Gendered Analysis of Women in Combat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

³⁴ O’Reilly, ‘Why women?’.

³⁵ Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev, ‘Beyond’.

³⁶ Yael Levi-Hazan and Ayelet Harel-Shalev, “‘Where am I in this story?’ Listening to activist women writers”, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28:4 (2019), pp. 387–401.

³⁷ Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, *Breaking*.

³⁸ Edna Lomsky-Feder and Orna Sasson-Levy, *Women Soldiers and Citizenship in Israel: Gendered Encounters with the State* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

understanding of protection change from a patriarchal version to a ‘softer’ or more motherly version? What is the impact of this change on the discourse surrounding the ‘state as a protector’, and will it offer some new perspectives on the matter? Ultimately, I hope that the answers to these and similar questions will facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the narratives of women as state actors.

Women’s agency in militarised contexts

Discussions of agency are often contextualised within a framework of a larger study of social structures, namely, the rules, patterns, and forces that both constrain and guide the human capacity to act.³⁹ Research on agency, specifically on narratives of women’s agency and self, is increasingly being focused on how geographically and politically specific contexts and spaces inform these narratives.⁴⁰ There is a strong linkage between feminism and agency, and, indeed, for feminist scholars, the significance – and appeal – of the concept of agency lies in its embodiment of the potential for empowerment and of the potential ability to overcome barriers.^{41,42} Ortner shows that female agency cannot be understood without taking into account the individual projects, desires, and experiences that women express and achieve through the different ‘power games’ in which they are involved.⁴³ She argues that the same ‘power game’ that produces the subordination of women in a specific setting – for instance, the relationship between men and women in a church, factory, or army – can enhance individual projects or produce liberating effects when viewed in relation to another sphere of power, such as the family or the community. Nonetheless, in seeking to investigate agency on its own terms,⁴⁴ the growing body of research about agency has explored different issues and employed different perspectives, including agency in non-Western societies and in illiberal societies, as well as in military environments.

Within this body of research, Björkdahl and Selimovic⁴⁵ call for an exploration of the agency of women in conflict areas and peacekeeping operations. Badaró⁴⁶ looks into agency in the military and rightly claims that female agency cannot simply be assumed from women’s acceptance or rejection of male domination; rather, it must be deduced from contextualised and specific power relations that enable different forms of subordination and autonomy. In this regard, Rosman-Stollman adds that military service could be considered as an act of bargaining for rights and acknowledgement.⁴⁷ Badaró indicates that some studies expect female soldiers to develop political agency, to resist the military system altogether, and to resist state actions, even though the soldiers themselves do not, in fact, recognise themselves as those who execute acts of resistance (and would face dire consequences should they do so).⁴⁸ The lack of evidence for the existence of this kind of agency is often taken as ‘proof’ that military women are being manipulated by a system

³⁹ Sarah Gammage, Naila Kabeer, and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers, ‘Voice and agency: Where are we now?’, *Feminist Economics*, 22:1 (2015), pp. 1–29.

⁴⁰ Mounira M. Charrad, ‘Women’s agency across cultures: Conceptualizing strengths and boundaries’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 33:6 (2010), pp. 517–22.

⁴¹ Charrad, ‘Women’s agency’.

⁴² Rebecca B. Kook and Ayelet Harel-Shalev, ‘Patriarchal norms, practices and changing gendered power relations: Narratives of Ultra-Orthodox women in Israel’, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 28:7 (2020), pp. 975–98.

⁴³ Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁴⁴ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴⁵ Annika Björkdahl and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, ‘Gendering agency in transitional justice’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:2 (2015), pp. 165–82.

⁴⁶ Máximo Badaró, ‘“One of the guys”: Military women, paradoxical individuality, and the transformations of the Argentine army’, *American Anthropologist*, 117:1 (2015), pp. 86–99.

⁴⁷ Elisheva Rosman-Stollman, ‘Military service as bargaining: The case of religious women soldiers in Israel’, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 19:2 (2018), pp. 158–75.

⁴⁸ Badaró, ‘One of the guys’.

that grants them a feeling of individual self-esteem in exchange for their reinforcing and legitimising the very ideological mechanism that authorises their gender subordination, or as those who adopt militarised feminism.⁴⁹ The problem with this assumption, according to Badaró,⁵⁰ is that it minimises both the multiple meanings that women soldiers attribute to their membership in the armed forces and the modalities of agency that they do find or act upon within the power relations they experience in the army.

The relationship between the military and masculinity is considered ‘natural’ – ‘taken-for-granted’⁵¹ – but the broadening of conscription to include women has not necessarily broadened the notion of ‘military masculinity’.⁵² As Kronsell suggests,⁵³ by focusing on the experiences of women ‘struggling’ in institutions of hegemonic masculinity, we can learn new things about gendered practices as well as about women’s agency. The analysis of the interview narratives in the current research enables us to see additional perspectives of agency in a militarised context, since the narratives reflect upon physical and other aspects of power and on the body; for example, Suzanna, one of the interviewees in this study, explained: ‘physically, you are not like a man, and you need to prove yourself. Since he is a man, it is obvious that he can make it’. In this context, Suzanna shared that she sees herself as tiny, as feminine, but, at the same time, as capable of filling challenging masculine roles. She can be both tiny and competent, and although she found it both physically and emotionally challenging, she wanted to perform difficult tasks and be equal to men.

The presence of women in high-command discussions and on the battlefield is often difficult for men to interiorise. These difficulties have been documented in militaries worldwide. What is often less well documented are women’s reactions to the common resentment to their presence: Hila, a lieutenant colonel in intelligence, emphasised:

I was participating in a classified discussion with high-ranking generals, and I began to present my data, and then, someone interrupted with a comment related to his wife and myself. I answered sharply, ‘Is there anyone else here who wants to comment on women? Let us finish with that now and then I will be able to continue’. From that time onwards, I didn’t hear anymore comments like that.

She continued to describe herself in civilian life, saying:

I am a strong woman, I know what I want; and I don’t give up, even at work [civilian life] people had a hard time adjusting to my character, and now we are getting along OK ... It is clear to me that I am frightening to some of the men, but that’s OK, let them be frightened ... Now we are working well together.

Such processes of self-reflection and development of agentic perspectives continue along the continuum from military to civilian life. Hila is well aware that women are expected to be polite and to be grateful for the opportunities that are given to them. But she refuses to play along and will not apologise for her abilities or be placed in a particular category simply because she is a woman. The findings in this research push us to wonder if in 10 years or so, the presence of more women veterans in senior positions in civil life will create change in the spirit of Hila’s response.

⁴⁹Yagil Levy, ‘Feminism and the army don’t mix, even in Israel’, *Haaretz* (14 January 2020), available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2020-01-14/ty-article-opinion/premium/feminism-and-the-army-don-t-mix-even-in-israel/0000017f-f73e-d318-aff-f77fd6fb0000>.

⁵⁰Badaró, ‘One of the guys’, p. 90.

⁵¹Annica Kronsell, ‘Methods for studying silences: Gender analysis in institutions of hegemonic masculinity’, in Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 108–28.

⁵²Corinna Peniston-Bird, ‘Classifying the body in the Second World War: British men in and out of uniform’, *Body & Society*, 9:4 (2003), pp. 31–48 (p. 42).

⁵³Kronsell, ‘Methods’.

Shibolet explained the challenges and struggles she experienced during her service:

As a combatant, I experienced some very intense incidents. The training is fine, but when the action begins, it is madness – fighting, fire over your head, loud noise, people being killed on both sides, and you function as expected and beyond that, you constantly push forward, trying to excel. You know that the guys are looking at you, looking to see if you fail, to see if you step back. It took some time until they felt they could rely on me. If a man fails, well – no one would say – *men are not suitable to be combatants*; but if a woman fails – it is not her individual failure – it is more general *women are failing*. I worked really hard to be better than anyone else. I knew I could do it ... As long as military service is needed, both men and women should participate in it. Perhaps my kids won't be forced to report for mandatory service, perhaps peace will be here in the region, who knows.

Building on the important works of Carreiras,⁵⁴ Duncanson and Woodward,⁵⁵ and others, it seems that there is a need for more scholarship that can further our understanding of how and where the inclusion of women moves beyond tokenism and backlash in the military context. Reading between the lines of Shibolet's narrative, discussing agency and failure, we begin to understand the burden that she is assuming. She cannot fail, since any failure would not be only hers, but a failure of women in general. Her perspective is not particularly militaristic; it is mostly practical.

The actions of the women interviewed here have taken their toll, alongside the exposure of the women to violence, death, and injuries during combat. These women thus often reflected on their own experiences and positionalities as well as on gender, femininity, masculinity, and feminism in general. Ma'ayan shared:

The most confusing thing in combat service in the military is that in the name of feminism you become a man and act according to masculine rules. Instead of inserting feminine rules that are meaningful and equally good, your rebellion [in becoming a combatant] eventually consists of transforming into more of a man than a woman ... The common knowledge is that in order to be a good combatant you have to act as a man ... What does it mean to be a woman combatant? ... To be a good combat commander [as things stand], I need to be less sensitive and complex; I need to understand and adopt masculine codes; [I need] to be stronger. What we understand [in this role] is that in order to be equal, we [women combatants] need to behave like men.

The narratives of agency of these women were not without conflicts and doubts. Ma'ayan's narrative, as a commander in a combat unit, expressed her resistance to the fact that after waging a feminist battle to be allowed to fill combatant roles, women are essentially expected to act like men. This is the perspective of a woman who served among many men, in a masculine organisation, where only a small percentage of her peers were women. Her agency allowed her to develop a unique stance regarding femininity and masculinity, and in her interview she labelled herself feminist, repeating it several times. Nonetheless, some cracks in gendered dichotomies are immediately recognisable in her conceptualisation. She questions not only the meanings of masculinity and femininity, but also the valuing of masculinity over femininity and hence the hierarchical thinking that characterised gender relations in her milieu.

Women's actions, experiences, and roles should be analysed according to their position in the society in question, taking into account the power relations of that society. In addition, scholars should be attentive to the narrative through which women make sense of their own experiences and to the manner in which women understand their own realities. I would argue that by 'seeing'

⁵⁴Helena Carreiras, *Gender and the Military: Women in the Armed Forces of Western Democracies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁵Duncanson and Woodward, 'Regendering.'

women, feminists are able to question their invisibility and supposed lack of relevance to national security, politics, and international affairs.

The capabilities and experiences of the combatants remain with them when they move into civilian life. Sometimes in the interviews with discharged women combatants, the interviewees still appeared to regard themselves as soldiers. For example, even though the interviews took place several years after their service had ended, many women still spoke of their military service in the present tense.

I am a combatant; it is, in my view, proof that I can do anything in [civilian] life. Since, if I did this, is there anything I cannot do? Until today, I am very proud of this [having served in combat], I wouldn't change it for the world.

(Suzanna)

In an examination of these narratives, we see that women in combat roles grapple with the familiar constructions and interpretations of femininity and masculinity. The interviewees posed questions such as: How should we act? Are we feminine enough? Are we becoming men? Informatively, as Ma'ayan emphasised in her interview, many of the women in combat-related roles were eager to develop a different perception of what it means to be feminine. A frequent theme in the interviews was the desire to interpret femininity in an alternative way that would emphasise strength and the ability to protect others, rather than, or in addition to, fragility. This is their feminist interpretation of their roles in the military and their agency.

And yet the exclusionary mechanisms that aim to marginalise women in the military, diminishing their impact, recognition, and accomplishments, come into play precisely at the point at which the potential for agency among female soldiers and officers emerges. This transformation may have wider ramifications, since societies do not consider women soldiers to be 'soldiers' but rather to be 'women soldiers' – their gender marks their identity on the battlefield. In this context, they develop their perceptions about their agency and abilities, which hold the potential to alter gender relations not merely in the military, but also in society as a whole. This finding is compatible with Kronsell's perspective that has taught us about strengthening women's confidence in themselves, and about the use of the women-in-arms concept to encourage skilled independent women in militarised contexts.⁵⁶ By analysing women's agency, and its various forms, we can open up for investigation both individual and collective performances of agency that unfold in unstable times, both times of progress and times of social backlash.⁵⁷ In the current study, we encounter women who express their agency while making war and not, necessarily, making peace. Moreover, we 'meet' women who express their agency in ways that position them not only as skilled women who can overcome obstacles, but also as women who can protect themselves and others – feeling that they can do their jobs as well as men do theirs, and in some cases even better.

Women soldiers as protectors: Can *she* protect the state?

Some states regard women as irrelevant to issues of security and defence.^{58,59} In mythological stories,^{60,61,62} and later in other historical stories, the need to protect women causes wars, and the

⁵⁶ Annika Kronsell, *Gender, Sex and the Postnational Defense: Militarism and Peacekeeping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁵⁷ Björkdahl and Selimovic, 'Gendering'.

⁵⁸ Kronsell, 'Methods'.

⁵⁹ Kronsell, *Gender*.

⁶⁰ David R. Segal, Nora Scott Kinzer, and John C. Woelfel, 'The concept of citizenship and attitudes toward women in combat', *Sex Roles*, 35 (1977), pp. 469–77.

⁶¹ Jonathan D. Wadley, *Gendering the State: Performativity and Protection in International Security* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

⁶² Jacqui True, 'A tale of two feminisms in International Relations? Feminist political economy and the Women, Peace and Security agenda', *Politics & Gender*, 11:2 (2015), pp. 419–24.

heroes of those stories – men – are expected to fight those wars as women’s protectors. Women’s need for protection allegedly justifies the social dominance of masculinity,⁶³ just as it justifies wars.⁶⁴ Moreover, when our focus shifts to *who is being protected*, and to the construction of protector/protected identities, we see that these identities are crucial to the discourses of national security and war-making.⁶⁵

The integration of women into modern militaries is undermining these ideas, although the question of inequalities remains in the foreground. Tickner,⁶⁶ Enloe,⁶⁷ and Kronsell⁶⁸ have called attention to inequalities in the military, claiming that the relationships between protectors and protected deepen gender inequalities, since the militarised version of security privileges the masculine characteristics that elevate men’s status.⁶⁹ The narratives of women combatants present a different story – not only can women’s agency be shaped by the presence of women in the military high command and in combat roles, but their service in combat roles can also shake up and change state narratives regarding gendered protection. This stance was very adequately represented by Leila:

I was trained as a combatant, and it is not conventional to see a woman in this role. It is also still rare to see women on the battlefield. The fact that women serve in this role is not obvious; I feel that in my service I protected my country, and I am proud. I went through difficult things, as the men did, I did not complain, and I fulfilled this in the best way that I could. Some raised an eyebrow, some were sceptical, but I managed to accomplish my missions, to give backup to my peers, to protect them, to protect Israeli villages in the southern part of Israel. I hate these operations and wars, but I admit I feel satisfaction.

Alongside their ‘invasion’ of the traditional male territory of combat, women in combat roles further blur gender roles by taking on the role of protectors – protectors of men and women alike, and protectors of the state. This gendered protector/protected binary has also been challenged in previous research. For example, Swedish and Danish women soldiers stationed as peacekeepers in Afghanistan perceived their role as protectors of Afghan women.⁷⁰

In the interviews that I conducted, I noticed frequent references to protective elements in the women’s roles: they described how they protected both men and women on the front line and on the home front, including instances in which they protected others and instances in which they resisted being protected by men. Therefore, it seems that the subtext of the interviews was far more complicated than the surface story in that the interviewees were actually breaking away from traditional dichotomies of protected vs. protecting and male vs. female.

Linda shared her experience as a combat-support soldier as a commander in a war room:

The General chose me to advise him about the forces on the ground. He knew that I am experienced, that I am cautious, that I am good. He could have picked one of the guys, but he chose me. The forces moved through the war rooms and constantly asked us to take good care of them; they knew that when I am in charge, I will do whatever I can to protect them. My friend served on a different front and had the same experiences; we are doing the best job, you see.

⁶³ Iris Marion Young, ‘The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29:1 (2003), pp. 1–25.

⁶⁴ Elshstain, *Women and War*.

⁶⁵ Cecelia Åse, ‘The gendered myth of protection’, in Caron E. Gentry, Laura J. Shepherd, and Laura Sjoberg (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 273–83.

⁶⁶ J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

⁶⁷ Cynthia H. Enloe, *Nimo’s War, Emma’s War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2010).

⁶⁸ Kronsell, *Gender*.

⁶⁹ Ayelet Harel-Shalev, ‘A room of one’s own (?)’ in battlespace: Women soldiers in war rooms’, *Critical Military Studies*, 7:1 (2018), pp. 42–60.

⁷⁰ Annika Bergman Rosamond and Annika Kronsell, ‘Cosmopolitan militaries and dialogic peacekeeping: Danish and Swedish women soldiers in Afghanistan’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 20:2 (2018), pp. 172–87.

Adding women to the battlefield as combatants gives rise to several changes in gender roles,^{71,72} for example, as Linda presented, women combat-support officers are in a position to protect men combatants on the ground. Another important example is that of women combat medics tasked not only with medical duties but also with evacuating the corpses of soldiers; in addition to the physical effort of treating wounded soldiers and moving bodies, these women soldiers are, in practice, also providing emotional protection to the men combatants. As Adina stated:

imagine what would happen to the soldiers if they saw their friends burned, it's horrible. The goal was to get the bodies out ... as fast as we could, no matter with what vehicle, no matter how. I did it for the soldiers, they shouldn't see their friends dead.

In parallel to gradually opening more roles for women, in practice, there is a trend in several militaries, including the IDF, to assign combat women to peaceful borders, far from actual battle.⁷³ This policy could be perceived by some as the feminist ideal – being both integrated into the most 'prestigious roles' in the military (as combatants) and rarely being in a position of harming anyone while protecting the borders of the country. However, the women combatants' perception of this choice was quite different. They perceived it as rejection or even criticism and said they felt that even after they completed all the training, the military still preferred men. They expressed frustration when their combat brigade was moved to a quieter front, or when they were not chosen for a mission at the front: in other words, the women were frustrated by the military's apparent need to protect them. Some even mentioned specific incidents in which men were chosen for a certain role in preference to them.

When women entered the masculine domain of combat as a small minority, they felt the need to adjust to masculine norms; they felt grateful to be able to serve in 'prestigious roles' formerly reserved for men. If one wishes to examine changes in notions of protection, and gender roles of protecting and being protected, it might be better to look into military units where women are integrated in relatively large numbers. However, as suggested by Celis et al.,⁷⁴ instead of looking for a 'critical mass' of women, one might explore the many ways in which 'critical actors' in various locations can promote what they regard as women's concerns. Indeed, even in units where women are a small minority, the agency of those women combat soldiers is expressed in multiple ways, and they are well aware of their capabilities and their contribution to what they see as 'national security'. They frequently refer to themselves as the protectors of men and the protectors of the state. Yàara stated:

I was protecting the soldiers that were 'in' [inside operational territory] and gave them backup in various ways. I can't tell you everything, some of it is confidential, but as a combat medic in an elite unit, I felt that I managed to protect them both physically and mentally. At the same time, I was one of them, fighting along with them. When I went home and told some of these stories, people opened their eyes widely 'oh my', although some were sceptical that a woman did all that, but most of them were quite impressed. It's not such a big deal, really; if it were my brother telling these stories; it would not be an issue. It's only because I am a woman – I am supposed to be weak and seek help, and all of a sudden – 'I am the man' [laughing].

⁷¹Kronsell, 'Methods'.

⁷²Kronsell, *Gender*.

⁷³The October 2023 Israel/Hamas war is the first major war in which women combatants in the IDF are fighting alongside their male peers in large numbers.

⁷⁴Karen Celis, Sarah Childs, Johanna Kantola, and Mona Lena Krook, 'Rethinking women's substantive representation', *Representation*, 44:2 (2008), pp. 99–110 (p. 99).

Young has taught us that ‘there are two faces to the security state, one facing outward to defend against enemies and the other facing inward to keep those under protection under necessary control’.⁷⁵ Accordingly, the women interviewed in the current study positioned themselves into either of these two roles, protecting the state and its enemies and protecting the home front. They are doing so while the dominant male leadership does not always acknowledge their contribution or grant them credit for their actions. Moreover, in some instances, the women felt conflicted in situations in which men decided that they need to protect the women and not to send them to be positioned first in the frontline, as well as in situations in which they were not given credit for their achievements. Yet they all felt empowered by their actions and responsibilities and often described how they insisted on being acknowledged for their part in the protection of the state and the society.

Discussion and conclusions

In the contemporary world and far back in the past those societies of which we know have all, to differing degrees and in different ways, been characterized by the supremacy of men and masculinity, the subordination of women and femininity.⁷⁶

Cockburn’s observation of 2010 is still valid today and is even more apt in the context of the military environment. Militaries are an important subject for feminist investigation, because they are one of society’s key institutions structured with overt gendered power.⁷⁷ Perceiving gender as a social construct reveals that it is a consistent factor in power relations, that is to say, of asymmetry, inequality, and domination.⁷⁸ Indeed, in this context, feminist IR scholars have challenged mainstream accounts of security policy by paying close attention to their impact on people’s everyday lives and by ‘telling security narratives from the ground up and thereby adopting a bottom-up approach’.⁷⁹ This notion is true in the military environment and elsewhere.⁸⁰ Moreover, by ignoring gender, the mainstream analyst will remain blind to processes through which gendered identities are produced – processes that are in many ways central to the operation of world politics.⁸¹ Studying the incorporation of women in combat roles is important in that we need to trace the process and the challenges they face, such as sexual harassment, marginalisation, and so on. However, we must also pay attention to the various elements of the story they tell. These elements affect gender relations in today’s society and have the potential to further alter gender relations in future generations.

Additionally, seeing the state as a unified actor that is represented only by its the ruling leaders of the time, and not disaggregating the state into its various arms and bodies, might lead to distorted or misleading interpretations of a variety of state narratives.^{82,83} But then again, one might reflect on whether or not military women can use their voice.⁸⁴ Although the linkage between protection and agency is intriguing, the narratives of the soldiers interviewed for this study included many more subjects for consideration than the elements of agency and protection elaborated above; these women’s experiences in the military exemplify the complexity of the perspectives that have

⁷⁵Young, ‘The logic’, p. 16.

⁷⁶Cynthia Cockburn, ‘Militarism and war’, in Laura J. Shepherd (ed.), *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 110–19 (p. 108).

⁷⁷Eichler, ‘Gender’, p. 3.

⁷⁸Sjoberg, ‘Agency’.

⁷⁹Annick T. R. Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 21.

⁸⁰Sarai B. Aharoni, Amalia Sa’ar, and Alisa C. Lewin, ‘Security as care: Communitarianism, social reproduction and gender in southern Israel’, *Feminist Theory*, 23:4 (2022), pp. 444–66.

⁸¹Wadley, *Gendering*.

⁸²Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev, ‘Beyond’.

⁸³Harmonie Toros, *Terrorism, Talking and Transformation: A Critical Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁸⁴Duncanson and Woodward, ‘Regendering’.

informed their diverse securities and insecurities. Their testimonies illuminated aspects of the military experience that are often absent, both from dominant narratives of war and combat service and from conventional state narratives. Along with the consequences that combat women are being militarised, that they are being exposed to violence, and that they are taking part in violence, there are other elements of agency and protection that are no less deserving of attention. Various perspectives of the interviewees' agency, such as assertiveness, a strong belief in their capabilities, and the constant struggle to integrate (some of which were successful, and some not), were all a substantial part of their experiences. Furthermore, most of them were also convinced that they were the best candidates for their roles and able to protect their peers, their units, their country, and their 'front' in the best way possible. Indeed, the realisation on the part of the women that they were participating in the protection of their society/state and protection of their peers was a dominant theme in the interviews. Therefore, we have to put forward a different question: To what extent are the elements of agency of women combatants and protection by women in combat a part of feminism?

Often enough, the starting point of feminist scholars and activists is that nobody – male or female – should engage in violence, take lives, or risk lives. Hence, when studying women in combat they end up berating (or praising) women for their role in the army. However, such an approach obscures the agency women exercise in their role as combatants. The narratives of the women interviewed reflect the notions: 'women can do anything', and/or 'anything he can do ...'; yet women still have to battle for their place in battlespace. Since feminism has different meanings and interpretations, one cannot conclude in a decisive manner whether their actions and perspectives are feminist acts. It is a matter of interpretation, and pacifists would probably argue otherwise. Yet I would urge us to continue thinking in a non-binary manner about the women's narratives of being state actors and of taking part in violence while being state actors. Within this scenario, women soldiers still struggle for recognition – struggle for a room of their own. In agreement with Duncanson and Woodward,⁸⁵ in the discussion of 'the right to fight', I reject the dichotomy between liberal feminism and radical feminism as equivalent to inclusion in the military vs. necessarily banning inclusion – there are so many more layers to this discussion. Moreover, I also reject the automatic definition of women in the military as those who are promoting 'militarised feminism',⁸⁶ since the narrative shows that the kernel of the notion is about 'being as good as he is' and about protecting the state; it is not about the excitement of killing or hurting others. Clearly, it is a feminist responsibility to explore these voices in depth.

The various positionalities of women in combat-related roles affect their perspectives. As Bergman Rosamond and Kronsell stated,⁸⁷ Danish and Swedish women, for example, involved in international peacekeeping may experience their roles differently from many US servicewomen, who have different backgrounds, in similar situations. They reported that the Danish and Swedish women felt a sense of agency and a cosmopolitan obligation while serving in various operations and protecting those who – in their view – needed protection. In a similar vein, the positionalities of the Israeli women interviewed in this study are important, since they affect their perspectives.

The above notwithstanding, the relevance of the current study extends far beyond the Israeli case, even though it is unique in its involvement in a constant intractable conflict of many decades and in its consequent militarised perspective. The ideas presented here about gendered protection and agency are also relevant in more peaceful regions in which women are integrated into 'peacekeeping operations', and in locations of conflict around the globe. Indeed, the role of women in these scenarios, their sense of agency and ways in which others perceive their contribution to the protection of the state and the region are also changing in ways similar to the processes described above in Israel.

I conclude with a vignette that perfectly reflects the essence of this article. In April 2021, on Israel's Memorial Day, the then Chief of the General Staff Aviv Kochavi gave a speech entitled

⁸⁵Duncanson and Woodward, 'Regendering'.

⁸⁶Levy, 'Feminism'.

⁸⁷Bergman Rosamond and Kronsell, 'Cosmopolitan', p. 173.

‘Three Mothers’, in which he described courageous women who had sacrificed their sons.⁸⁸ One wonders, why was that topic chosen? Thousands of women were already serving in combat roles in the military. Several women had lost their lives in Israel’s wars and military operations. But the narrative that was chosen by him was the narrative of mothers sacrificing their boys. The division into gendered roles was once again brought into the public discourse, as happens again and again; but this time, women were not silent. Several responses were recorded in the public sphere. A woman combat soldier wrote an article that was published anonymously the next day in one of Israel’s daily newspapers:

To the Chief of Staff, my commander, it seems that there are no female combatants, no pilots, no captains, no artillery combatants, no combat-support technicians, no military police combatants, no infantry, no commanders. The women in Kochavi’s life are mothers ... waiting and caring for their sons ... Kochavi is also not familiar with my uncle who lost his son and then died of a broken heart. Exactly as women are merely mothers in his view, men are not dads, they are probably combatants.

I respect those who chose to be mothers. I respect the mothers who lost their loved ones, but I am here to remind you that in 2021 women are not only mothers. They are mothers if they choose to be. If your vision for the IDF is to put us back to being the crying figures, the tragic, the taken for granted, then forget it. Especially on Memorial Day, we won’t take your shit.⁸⁹

This combatant’s open letter emphasises the dilemmas surrounding the gendered narratives of the state. As this newspaper article shows, the woman combatant’s frustration and resistance focused on the exclusion of female combatants (and male carers) from state discourses – they should not be disregarded, on the contrary.

While the military is considered to be a key institution of overt gendered power in the state, women combatants’ voices can create a crack in the masculine dominance that is taken for granted in state narratives; they can also form the wedge that allows in a reconsideration of gendered roles and power relations in the context of militaries, thereby offering various nuanced interpretations of protection and agency. There is still a long way before combat women and their contribution to the protection of the state will be acknowledged publicly by all, but their sense of agency and their confidence in their abilities have changed forever. When these women leave the military for their civilian lives, they will demand ‘a seat at the table’, they will demand ‘a seat of their own’.

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⁸⁸ IDF, ‘IDF Chief of Staff salutes Israel’s heroes: The “three mothers” speech’, IDF website (2021), available at: <https://www.idf.il/en/articles/israeli-memorial-day/the-three-mothers-speech/>.

⁸⁹ Anonymous woman combatant, ‘Lo mevatro lecha Kochavi’ [Not letting you get away with it Kohavi], *Haaretz* (22 April 2021), available at: <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/letters/premium-1.9737339>.