Gender, Sexuality, Warfighting & the Making of American Citizenship Post-9/11

Katharine M. Millar

The so-called global war on terror marked a pivotal moment in the intersection of gender, sexuality, military service, and U.S. warfighting. This essay explores, via paradigmatic empirical incidents, three key dimensions of gendered warfare – military service, support for the military, and protest/dissent – to reveal a central paradox in the post-9/11 U.S. gender-war system. While military service has declined overall, efforts to formally include women and LGBTQ+ people in the armed forces have coincided with the ongoing valorization of a narrow gendered ideal of soldiering and citizenship (often cisgender, heterosexual, masculine, and white). Despite (potentially temporary) increased formal equality and inclusion, the global war on terror reinforced the existing U.S. heteropatriarchal sex-gender order, characterized by a mandatory heterosexuality and binary, deterministic account of gender. This model of gendered, martial citizenship promotes civilian deference to the military and subverts the democratic oversight of the armed forces.

What did the "global war on terror" do to the relationship between gender, the military, and citizenship in the United States? At first glance, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq appear to be accompanied by gains in formal equality for women alongside people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions. By 2015, all restrictions on women's service in the U.S. military, notably the last remaining exclusions from combat roles, had been lifted. In 2011, the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy prohibiting lesbian, gay, and bisexual people from openly serving in the U.S. military had been repealed; same-sex marriage was legalized four years later. Given the centrality of military service to historical struggles for citizenship rights, recognition, and dignity in the United States, most notably in the long struggle against anti-Black racism, the increased participation of people previously excluded from, or marginalized within, the U.S. military has sociopolitical significance beyond the institution.

I argue, however, that these moves toward formal equality and institutional inclusion did not challenge prevailing masculinized, heterosexual ideals of norma-

https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED.a.961

tive citizenship and military service. Instead, including previously marginalized groups into formally open service broadened the ambit of people considered part of these gendered ideals of heterosexual military masculinity. Consequently, the primary effect of the global war on terror (GWoT) on gender, sexuality, and citizenship in the United States was to reify a binary sex-gender order as the basis for soldiering and citizenship.

Here, gender refers to but also exceeds embodied identity. Gender is a form of social and normative structure, comprising intersubjective ideas, beliefs, values, and relationships. Though gender is nonbinary and diverse, in the contemporary United States it is typically understood as expressing expectations of appropriate behavior, identity, and actions for men and women, articulated through binary notions of masculinity and femininity. This normative binary sense of sex/gender is associated with a likewise normative, binary sense of sexuality, wherein heterosexuality is normalized in contrast to devalorized notions of homosexuality.

The meanings of masculinity and femininity are contextual and relational. They are articulated through a process of gendered contrast and association, in which values, ideas, and concepts associated with masculinity are typically esteemed and hierarchically elevated over those associated with femininity.[1] In the United States, idealized understandings of masculinity often involve attributes such as rationality, strength, righteous violence, public life, and general political agency; femininity is often associated with private life, emotion, vulnerability, dependence, and general passivity.[2] Together, binary understandings of gender and sexuality operate to order social and political life, including military service and idealized citizenship.

This essay proceeds with an account of the relationship between military service, citizenship, and normative gender within liberal democracies. I substantiate my argument through an examination of the gendering of three key facets of citizenship: military service, civilian support for the military, and antiwar dissent. I use three paradigmatic events – the graduation of the first women from U.S. Army Ranger School, the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and the antiwar protests of peace activist Cindy Sheehan – to illustrate the intertwining of formal inclusion with the reification of heteropatriarchal, martial citizenship. I conclude by arguing that the global war on terror has reinforced the existing U.S. heteropatriarchal sex-gender order, promoting civilian deference to the military and undermining democratic oversight of the armed forces.

Schematically, citizenship within liberal democracies such as the United States is straightforward. Individuals give up the right to the independent use of violence in return for the state's protection of their liberty from internal predation and external war. This account of political obligation and civic rights is formally universal; it is ideologically intended to pertain to all individuals equally, independent of social positioning and/or embodied identity.

As feminist political theorists have observed, however, this understanding of citizenship is less neutral to power and identity than it is blind. They argue that the ability of the rational, atomistic individual to exercise their rights in the public sphere is premised upon the labor of women and/or feminized subjects in the private sphere.[3] The public sphere is understood as historically populated by men and conceptually masculinized. The private sphere is associated with feminized values such as dependence, passivity, care, and family.[4] Critical race theorists have likewise observed that liberal citizenship is implicitly white, as white people's liberty and wealth are empirically and ideologically facilitated by the expropriation and exploitation of people of color via colonialism and slavery.[5]

The gendered division between the public and private mirrors a binary, gendered civil-military divide.[6] Empirically, we can see this dynamic in the history of U.S. civil-military relations. Early relations were characterized by a general suspicion of European-style standing armies combined with the valorization of the republican citizen-soldier as an enlightened, heroic amateur.[7] Through the cultural elision of the Civil War, an enduring image of the U.S. citizen-soldier as a white, individuated, ideally masculine family man, on call to defend hearth and home but eschewing international adventurism, was forged.[8] World War I, and World War II even more so, reinforced military service as a common experience and important gendered expectation of U.S. men (if on unequal terms).[9] Women entered the workforce at an unprecedented (if explicitly temporary) rate.[10] During both World Wars, the United States was characterized by a gendered division of violent labor, wherein all "good" men served in the armed forces and all "good" women cared for the home front, providing material and affective support for the war effort.[11]

Though a comparatively short period of U.S. history, World War II looms large as the "last good war": a righteous fight characterized by the collective sacrifice of heroic men and loyal women.[12] The military, reflecting the idealized attributes of masculinity associated with soldiering, such as bravery, sacrifice, and the righteous use of violence, is constructed as protecting a feminized, dependent, and vulnerable civil sphere. Civil-military relations in liberal democracies reflect a gendered logic that maps a heteronormative dynamic of patriarchal leadership and protection of an idealized nuclear family onto the state and civil-military relations writ large.[13]

Implicit and explicit references to an idealized, binary notion of sex/gender legitimate the state's warfighting and its extraction of military service. Within liberal democracies, military service is an underacknowledged form of political obligation and component of citizenship, albeit one that sits uneasily with liberalism's commitments to liberty, autonomy, and civic rights. The cultural and ideological association between military service and idealized heterosexual masculinity alleviates this tension through reference to ostensibly private social relations

and embodied identities.[14] The valorization of soldiering masculinity also, importantly, extends the ambit of military values, concepts, and ideals beyond the institutional military. Militarism is ideologically constructed and socially normalized through gendered logics, ideals, and relations; the historical insistence upon military service and martial violence as masculine reifies a heteropatriarchal gender order.[15]

Across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, the exclusion of particular groups from formal public institutions – especially those as symbolically and materially important as the military – became increasingly untenable under political liberalism. Military service, as argued separately by political scientists Ronald Krebs and Elizabeth Kier, as a core expectation of citizenship and marker of political belonging, has served as an important component of broader struggles for civil rights, recognition, and dignity by marginalized groups.[16] As observed by historians Douglas W. Bristol Jr. and Heather Marie Stur, opposition to the integration of the armed forces was articulated with a predictable script, predicated on national security rationales: "[fill in the blank] is not fully capable and will hinder combat effectiveness; [fill in the blank] will disrupt unit cohesion and so diminish military effectiveness; allowing [fill in the blank] to serve will undermine training, make it impossible to recruit successfully, and disrupt military order."[17] Consequently, people within the military institution struggled for equality and recognition while the extension of military service, and the symbolic citizenship that such a move confers, was often driven from outside the formal institution (and met with considerable resistance). The service of Black Americans in World War II, combined with concerted political activism by Black civil rights leaders, led to the desegregation of the U.S. military in 1948. Minoritized, working class men's military service "earns" the citizenship conferred on privileged white and propertied men by assumption.[18]

Women's (understood primarily as ciswomen's) military service traced a similar trajectory across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: partial inclusion during the World Wars, removal of formal barriers to promotion during Vietnam, and eligibility for all military roles during the global war on terror. In 2015, Captain Kristen Greist, 1st Lieutenant Shaye Haver, and Major Lisa Jaster (Army Reserve) became the first women to graduate from the U.S. Army Ranger School.[19] The preceding fourteen years of the global war on terror had rendered the long-standing ban on women's combat participation untenable. The lack of a conventional "frontline" during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan meant that despite the formal designations of their roles, women were serving in combat. In 2008, for instance, Private First-Class Monica Lin Brown, a medic, was awarded the Silver Star for her valor in combat in a 2007 firefight in Afghanistan.[20]

The removal of the ban on women's participation in combat in 2015 aligned policy with ongoing military practice and solidified the framing of the U.S. military (and the United States) as committed to a formal, liberal vision of equality.[21] The graduation of the first women from the U.S. Army Ranger School – though accompanied by the usual pushback relating to military effectiveness, small unit combat cohesion, and gender-essentialist tropes of physical capacity – has been regarded as a form of feminist victory.[22] Women's actual contributions to the U.S. military are now formally recognized, opening avenues for greater participation and promotion across the institution. Not unlike struggles for racial equality, women's military service also symbolically underpins women's broader claims to rights and equality in all forms of politics and public life.

Feminist scholars have suggested, however, that the full formal participation of women in the U.S. military is less reflective of a commitment to equality than it is a concession to the changing nature of warfare.[23] Resistance to women's participation in the military, for instance, diminished following the transition to the all-volunteer force and corresponding "manpower" shortage post-Vietnam.[24] During the GWoT, the U.S. military's perceived need for "culturally sensitive" counter-insurgency led to the framing of women's exposure to combat, particularly in the form of Female Engagement Teams tasked with interacting with women and youth in Iraq and Afghanistan, as an operational necessity.

Women's visible military participation during the GWoT also served an important political function. It provided a vital contrast with the perceived inequality of women in Iraq and Afghanistan, rehearsing earlier racialized, Orientalist narratives that justified the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan as "saving" Afghan women.[25] The collision of liberal understandings of formal, universal gender equality with the racialized, Orientalist justification of the war on terror as "saving civilization" was also reflected in reactions to the sexualized torture of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. personnel at Abu Ghraib in 2003. Women's participation in torture was read, conversely, as a "perverse" sign of gender equality and as a reiteration of the role of white women in reproducing a hierarchical, racialized, and gendered colonial world order.[26] Women's combat participation can, likewise, be understood as a liberal feminist achievement, a bending of patriarchal gender norms and expectations to the demands of U.S. militarism, and an instrumentalization of liberal feminism in the service of imperial war.[27]

The limited, though not trivial, liberal vision of gender equality underpinning the combat ban removal is illustrated by the reported terms of gender-inclusive military service. Women's participation in combat was repeatedly framed as entirely gender-neutral, with an emphasis on shared standards, expectations, and behavior.[28] Women in combat roles insist on their formal and functional equivalence with men, noting that they take pains to establish their competence and authority within the conventionally masculine expectations of the role – stoicism,

discipline, physical excellence – and distance themselves from feminized attributes.[29] The fragility of formal equality is likewise evident in the disproportionate sexual harassment and violence faced by women, sexual minorities, and racial minorities in the U.S. armed forces.[30] A greater diversity of bodies is incorporated into an existing, heterosexual masculinized soldiering ideal that, along with an underlying binary sex-gender order, is left untouched. The relationship between gendered military service and normative citizenship is reinforced by its extension to a broader group of Americans.

The centrality of military values to U.S. citizenship and normative ideas of sex/gender is also reflected in gendered dynamics of support for the military. "Support the troops" was a rallying cry of the GWoT. The relationship between supporting the troops and gendered citizenship is particularly apparent in contestations over the open service of lesbian, gay, and bisexual military personnel.

On September 20, 2011, the Obama administration repealed the U.S. military's discriminatory Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) policy, which mandated that while gay, lesbian, and bisexual people were not prohibited from military service, they would be subject to discharge should their sexual orientation become known.[31] The initial 1994 DADT policy reflected an uneasy compromise between an awareness of the military service of LGBTQI+ people throughout U.S. history and a resistance to legitimating non-normative sexual and gender identities.[32] The repeal of DADT was another move toward the formal inclusion of marginalized groups into public service. It was also frequently justified with reference to martial, heteromasculinized citizenship expectations. The U.S. Department of Defense report on DADT's repeal, for instance, included a widely circulated anecdote wherein a "special operations warfighter told us, 'We have a gay guy. He's big, he's mean, and he kills a lot of bad guys. No one cared that he was gay.'"[33] Here, we see the refutation of implicit, homophobic tropes relating to femininity, weakness, and inferiority frequently projected upon lesbian, gay, and bisexual service members (and LGB people generally) through an invocation of stereotypical military attributes of violence, aggression, competence, and so on. [34] As observed by gender and sexuality scholar Jasbir K. Puar, the "exceptionalism" of participation in U.S. imperial war-making renders some minority identities socially comprehensible to the extent they are able to successfully perform heteronormative military masculinity.[35]

Popular support for the repeal of DADT outside the military institution likewise referenced the normative relationship between service and citizenship. For instance, Ta-Nehisi Coates, a prominent cultural commentator, criticized Republican electoral candidates opposed to DADT's repeal for the hypocrisy in declaring that they "support the troops" when, in his reading, a more honest accounting would be "I support some of the troops."[36] As I have argued elsewhere, during the

GWoT, calls to "support the troops" came to form a core component of normative citizenship, indicating masculinized civilian solidarity with active military personnel. [37] Politically, "supporting the troops" helps put to rest the mythologized specter of U.S. civilian society's ostensible betrayal of conscripted soldiers during Vietnam.[38]

During the DADT debate, the affective weight of this history was used to argue for recognizing the military service – and thus full citizenship – of lesbian, gay, and bisexual military personnel. Advocates of LGB military participation framed it as a civil rights victory, emphasizing that exclusion from the armed forces reinforced broader marginalization from public life based on "private" sexual identities.[39] At the same time, mirroring the dual edge of formal liberal political inclusion above, lesbian, gay, and bisexual personnel are included within the military on circumscribed terms contingent on the performance of conventional military masculinity and conformity with heteronormative respectability in identity, relationships, and family life. Both the heteromasculinized military citizenship ideal and the underlying binary sex-gender order remain intact, though amended to incorporate a specific lesbian, gay, and bisexual ideal vouchsafed by military service.

The mutual constitution of citizenship with a binary sex-gender order is illustrated by the harsh and unsettled treatment of queer and trans military personnel during, and since, the global war on terror. In 2016, the Obama administration announced that the U.S. military would recognize the gender identities of trans military personnel, enabling open service. Later, in 2017, then-President Trump ordered the repeal of open service for trans service members in a series of tweets, an announcement that created significant uncertainty regarding the rights of trans Americans, a series of legal challenges, and a temporary "ban" on open service by trans people.[40] In January 2021, the Biden administration repealed the discriminatory "trans ban," once again enabling trans people to openly serve in accordance with their gender identity. [41] On January 27, 2025, the Trump administration issued an executive order, actioned in a February 2025 memo by the Pentagon, that reinstated the ban, arguing, "the Armed Forces have been afflicted with radical gender ideology."[42]

The ongoing contestation regarding the equal, formal inclusion of trans people within the military parallels the dynamics of military support for LGB service people. Opponents of inclusive service invoke ideas of military fitness, readiness, and cohesion, while support for trans military service members invokes ideals of heteromasculine military competence, skill, and gendered solidarity owed to all of "the troops."[43]

Notably, opposition to the open service of trans service people also explicitly revolves around questions of sex, gender, normative bodies, and the role of the state in their regulation. This emphasis on bodies exists in conversation with ear-

lier objections to ciswomen's military service and fears about physical strength, menstruation, pregnancy, and the specter that the military may be obliged to provide reproductive health care.[44] Congressional Republicans pressured Trump for the initial ban on the basis of opposition to the military (and thus the U.S. government) providing funding and support for gender-affirming care.[45] For a portion of the U.S. polity, reflected in subsequent rollbacks in trans rights across the United States throughout the 2020s, the seeming challenge posed by trans bodies, lives, experiences, and identities to a dimorphic, biologically essentialist understanding of sex is incompatible with the normative citizenship symbolically conveyed by military service.

The support of military leaders for the brief 2021 repeal of the "ban" indicates that some forms of trans lives, experiences, and identities *may* be made commensurate with the broader normative expectations of military heteromasculinity.[46] Upon the announcement of the resumption of open service for trans Americans, the military personnel management director framed the decision as a win for formal equality, reiterated the military's need to recruit and retain all talented people, and noted pathways for personnel to receive medical supports.[47] The Biden-era reversal of this exclusion was, briefly, a gain for formal liberal understandings of citizenship and equality.

Both the reinstatement of the ban and the substance of Biden-era policies highlight a distinction in approaches to political belonging. While an LGB rights framework seeks inclusion and recognition within existing structures without challenging normative, binary, and cis understandings of sex/gender, queer and trans perspectives emphasize challenging, ignoring, or blurring these received accounts of gender and sexuality.[48] It is noteworthy that even the inclusive Biden-era U.S. military policy contains a limited, linear account of trans experience as a definitive shift from one identity to another. Though this experience is meaningful to many people, and vitally important from the perspective of equality, it does not encompass the whole of trans and queer lives, experiences, and identities.[49] The institutional military struggled to recognize nonbinary military personnel, as their gender identities do not align easily with the sex/gender binary upon which military policies and structures are organized.[50] The new "ban" exposes trans, genderqueer, and nonbinary people's fraught and uncertain access to normative citizenship. Even when qualified by obvious engagement with military heteromasculinity, gender and sexuality diversity troubles the underlying cisheteronormative binary upon which the martial, liberal (and not-so-liberal) gendered division of labor rests.

The durability of this configuration between gender, martiality, and citizenship also has concerning implications for antiwar protest and antimilitaristic dissent. It suggests that legitimate political speech is condi-

tioned both by adherence to a particular form of cisheteronormative gender and by deference to masculinized martial citizenship. From 2002 through early 2003, the prospect of invading Iraq was broadly popular with a majority of Americans (between 58 and 65 percent).[51] There were gender differences within this group: women were approximately 10 percent less likely to favor military action in Iraq than men.[52] This aligns with a long-standing moderate gender gap (approximately 8 percent) in U.S. citizens' support for war.[53]

At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Americans participated in mass protests against the war. During the transnational day of action on February 15, 2003, an estimated two-thirds of U.S. protestors were women.[54] As the GWoT continued, gender played an important role in radical antiwar protest. The feminist organization CodePink, for instance, used both conventional protests and direct action, such as vigils, spectacularized street theater performances, and meeting disruptions to oppose the war. In its founding statement, CodePink employed conventional understandings of femininity to qualify and assert their standing to protest:

> We call on mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and daughters, on workers, students, teachers, healers, artists, writers, singers, poets and every ordinary outraged woman willing to be outrageous for peace. Women have been the guardians of life – not because we are better or purer or more innately nurturing than men, but because the men have busied themselves making war.[55]

The strategic use of heteronormative, essentialist tropes regarding an ostensible affiliation between women and peace due to their "natural" role as mothers is an enduring feature of women's antiwar protest in the United States and elsewhere.[56] It was a common, though not uniform, component of women's antiwar protest during Vietnam.[57]

Despite this attempt to draw on heteronormative feminine respectability, during both the GWoT and Vietnam, women antiwar activists were often denigrated as naive and disloyal. As illustrated by the now-infamous framing of actress Jane Fonda as "Hanoi Jane" in response to her antiwar dissent, women activists were subject to being labeled as "bad women."[58] State condemnations of protest as giving "aid and comfort to the enemy" draw on an implicit sexualized logic of feminine loyalty to the masculinized military and specter of intimate infidelity and betrayal.[59]

The antiwar activism of military family members – notably the mothers of deceased military personnel – can sidestep the gendered and sexualized discursive trap of disloyalty. Cindy Sheehan, for instance, became a prominent antiwar activist in the early GWoT, following the 2004 death of her son, Casey Sheehan, while in action in Iraq. Cindy Sheehan founded Gold Star Families for Peace (an organization comprising other bereaved military family members opposed to the

war) and established an antiwar encampment outside then-President Bush's Texas ranch in the summer of 2005.[60]

Bereaved antiwar activists are constructed within broader social narratives as having "earned" the right to dissent through the military service, injury, or loss of their loved ones.[61] Sheehan, and other grieving military parents, accrue the moral authority to oppose the war through their status within the heteronormative nuclear family – and the involuntary "sacrifice" of their children to the U.S. military and global war on terror. Sheehan fulfilled her gendered obligations to U.S. war-making as mother to a soldier and later through his military service and death.

Gold Star mothers such as Sheehan, though authentically anguished by their unwanted roles as bereaved mothers, find the radical potential of their activism limited insofar as it is grounded in the heteronormative family.[62] As I have noted elsewhere, "the essentialistic, heteropatriarchal valorisation of a mother's love as a) private and b) above reproach" is what affords Sheehan the ability to oppose the war in Iraq.[63] But it also makes it difficult for Sheehan to be seen as anything *other* than a grieving mother.[64] The antiwar activism of grieving mothers is understood less as a political intervention than as an overwhelming emotional experience of private loss. (Here, it is important to note that Sheehan, like many CodePink activists, is white and granted more racialized leeway to break with existing norms of civility than activists, women, and mothers/parents of color.)[65]

Through its emphasis on sacrifice, this form of activism reinforces the centrality of masculinized military service to normative citizenship. In contrast to other nonserving civilians, bereaved military family members' antiwar activism cannot be framed as a function of feminized ignorance or masculinized cowardice. Instead, bereaved military family members are symbolically "excused" from gendered expectations of deference to the military in wartime through their vicarious military service.

Politically, this works similarly to military veterans' antiwar activism. As veterans have fulfilled the expectations of masculine citizenship and actively contributed to U.S. war-making, their right to dissent is incontrovertible (and specific acts of dissent are often politically and symbolically powerful).[66] The authority granted veterans in antiwar dissent, however, as it relies on the continued valorization of the masculinized soldier as a model of citizenship, inadvertently undermines the legitimacy of protest by civilians. The intersection of idealized gender roles with military service also sheds light on the frequent public suspicion – or denigration – of conscientious objectors. Men who are conscientious objectors not only violate the presumption that military service earns the right to dissent but *base* their dissent upon their lack of service; women and genderqueer individuals who are conscientious objectors violate both this masculinized expectation of martial citizenship and feminized expectations of deference and loyalty.[67]

The right to dissent that is central to political liberalism and U.S. civil rights is, in practice, conditioned by activists' proximity to military service and their related conformity with the cisheteronormative expectations of the existing binary gender order. Because most citizens do not, and will not, serve in the U.S. armed forces – as the essay by Rosa Brooks in this volume of *Dædalus* points out – this gendered, martial conditioning of dissent has troubling prospects for the meaningful civilian oversight of the military.[68] In a reversal of the democratic control of the armed forces, it suggests that only those with military experience are qualified to resist (and perhaps even govern) U.S. war-making.

Since September 11, 2001, U.S. war-making has been characterized by two dynamics with respect to gender, sexuality, and citizenship: one, the increasing participation and visibility of previously marginalized and minoritized groups within the institutional armed forces; and, two, the simultaneous reinforcement of existing martial ideals of citizenship and, with it, a sex-gender order that is binary and cisheteronormative. The gains made by women, lesbian, gay, and bisexual military personnel in securing formal equality in institutional military participation – and thus symbolic citizenship – especially in the current political moment of "antigender" backlash, are not insignificant. The continued struggles for rights, recognition, and dignity of trans and nonbinary U.S. military personnel, as well as these citizens more broadly, point to the perils of exclusion from equal citizenship.

At the same time, however, this extension of normative, gendered martial citizenship to a greater (if partial) array of people, bodies, and social positions has an important, if subtler, role in upholding U.S. war-making. The continued gendering and sexualizing of citizenship and U.S. social order depends upon open military service, just as the normative elevation of the soldier as the idealized citizen relies upon a gendered and sexualized structural dynamic between ostensibly separate civil and military spheres. Understanding the perpetuation of cisheteromasculinity as an ideal requires understanding its connection to military service and, increasingly, civilian support/deference as a condition of intelligible citizenship and normative public personhood.

The 2024 reelection of Donald Trump – and attendant moves to abrogate diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, revivify a caricatured hypercisheteromasculine "warrior culture" in the Department of Defense, and discharge trans service members – has brought these dynamics, latent under more liberal politics, to the fore.[69] The subtext has become text.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katharine M. Millar is Associate Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is the author of *Support the Troops: Military Obligation, Gender, and the Making of Political Community* (2022), associate editor of the journal *Security Dialogue*, and coeditor of the Cambridge University Press-London School of Economics International Studies Book Series.

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