

'Women helping women': Deploying gender in US counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

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Abstract

Central to the goal of 'hearts and minds' counterinsurgency is the need for knowledge, understanding and influence in relation to local populations. Building on feminist scholarship on counterinsurgency, the article focuses on the 'female engagement' work undertaken by four programmes developed by the US military between 2003 and 2014. The article offers three key arguments. First, it maintains that the gendered subjectivities of Iraqi and Afghan women and US female counterinsurgents are constructed as strategic assets and as vulnerable subjects. Second, these programmes reveal the extent to which gendered counterinsurgency is constituted and regulated by emotional and embodied norms and rules for both female soldiers and civilians. Third, it suggests that the discursive construction of 'winning hearts and minds' works to render less visible the violence of gendered counterinsurgency practices. Although gendered counterinsurgency mobilizes a relational ontology predicated on the emotional labour required for developing knowledge of the Iraqi and Afghan 'other', female engagement activities cannot escape the logic of instrumental reasoning within which they are located. Ultimately, recognizing the policy of female engagement as central to forms of knowledge production reveals the extent to which the violences of war rely on a complex set of gendered and affective relations.

Keywords

Afghanistan, counterinsurgency, emotions, gender, Iraq, 'hearts and minds'

'[I]n traditional societies, women are extremely influential in forming the social networks that insurgents use for support. Co-opting neutral or friendly women, through targeted social and economic programs, builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermines the insurgents. To do this effectively requires your own female counterinsurgents. Win the women and you own the family unit. Own the family and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population on your side.'

David Kilcullen (2006)

Introduction

Contemporary population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN), wherein the local civilian population is persuaded to support the counterinsurgent forces, is embedded within a long history of 'small'

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wars and colonial counterinsurgencies. Frequently presented in contemporary discourse as the ‘softer’ option, in opposition to the ‘kinetic’ force predicated on the capacity of the military to kill, this ‘civilianised option which aims at winning the hearts and minds of civilian populations . . . has a particularly gendered character’ (Khalili, 2011: 1473). US counterinsurgency doctrine published in the US Army Marine Corps (2007) operated as the basis for counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and identified women as essential to military success. Guidance for military commanders contained in the Center for Army Lessons Learned *Commander’s Guide to Female Engagement Teams* (11–38, 2011) declared that

female engagements are an integral component of COIN by embracing and understanding the missing 50 per cent of the populations; building relationships with the Afghan women to earn their trust, give women confidence in GIRoA [Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan]; divide them from those that violate their constitutional rights; and empower them to have a voice and ownership in solutions for problems in their families, villages, and country. (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 2)

Central to the goal of ‘hearts and minds’ counterinsurgency is the need for knowledge and understanding of, access to and influence/control over the local population. In this article I bring together four programmes developed and implemented by the US military between 2003 and 2014 which identify gender as central to the success of population-centric counterinsurgency. These programmes are the US Marine Corps Lioness Program in Iraq, US Marine Corps and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Female Engagement Teams (FETs) in Afghanistan, the US Army Human Terrain System (HTS) in Iraq and Afghanistan and US Army Special Operations Command Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) in Afghanistan. With the exception of the Human Terrain System, all of these programmes had gender as a primary selection criteria. In the case of HTS, gender was a relevant operational factor. In this article I argue that these programmes reveal the extent to which militarized forms of knowledge production are gendered and embodied, as well as dependent on and extractive of emotional labour.

What these programmes shared was a recognition of the ‘urgent search for knowledge about our sister “women of cover”’, as Lila Abu-Lughod wrote in the context of the ‘War on Terrorism’ that was justified by purporting to liberate or save Afghan women (2002: 783). Cultural explanations – through the search for sociocultural knowledge of distant others – displaced more complex and globally entangled political and historical explanations, sustaining an imagined cultural and geographical divide between East and West (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Barkawi and Stanski, 2012; Fernandes, 2017; Kandiyoti, 2007). In the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, culture was frequently conflated with gender and women’s rights which were, in turn, offered as central to the solution to the failure to stem the tide of violence.

The liberal narrative underpinning the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan spotlighted the defence of women’s rights (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Bhattacharyya, 2008; Dyvik, 2014). This narrative, which helped to construct Afghan and Iraqi women as in need of saving, served to conceal the ‘violences entailed in this transformation’ and the ‘presumptions . . . made about the superiority of that to which [they are being saved]’ (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 788–789). This narrative also intertwined the lives of American, Iraqi and Afghan women, pulling them into a universal and shared fight for rights. FET Army Major Maria Rodrigues drew parallels between the ‘military practice that kept her trapped on the FOB [Forward Operating Base] and the Taliban law that kept Afghan women . . . trapped in their homes’ (Rivers, 2018: 86). Thus we see that gendered assumptions about Iraqi and Afghan women and female US service members overlap and serve to reinforce universal ideals about gender identity and war.

This narrative made four gendered moves which underpinned the focus on culture in counterinsurgency. It essentialized a universal female understanding that transcends geopolitical, economic and sociopolitical differences; it constructed women as more peaceful, better for economic development and less corrupt; it drew on Orientalist constructions of Iraqi and Afghan women, and it focused on ‘authentic’ stories of personal suffering which led Western readers to conflate abuse and oppression with traditional culture (Fernandes, 2017). Common tropes of female empowerment and women as ‘agents of change’ focused on how to change the attitudes of Afghan men towards women, how to get more women in government, how to increase women’s self-esteem and uplift through education (Fernandes, 2017). Emotional stories of suffering and oppression were harnessed to political agendas and state foreign policy; in 2010, the CIA released a confidential memo noting that

Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanizing the ISAF role in combating the Taliban because of women’s ability to speak personally and credibly about their experiences under the Taliban, their aspirations for the future, and their fears of a Taliban victory. (CIA, 2010 cited in Fernandes, 2017: 643)

Feminist scholars of counterinsurgency have noted the degree to which ‘female bodies are held both to embody and access, as both custodians and conduits, the secrets indispensable to winning the war’ (Kinsella, 2019: 28; see also Dyvik, 2014; Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002; Khalili, 2011, 2014; McBride and Wibben, 2012; Mesok, 2015, 2016; Welland, 2015). At the crux of Helen Kinsella’s argument is that in the pursuit of sociocultural knowledge, women are both the objects of increased scrutiny and its necessary operatives (2019: 37) and are both ‘custodians’ and ‘conduits’ for the sociocultural knowledge deemed an integral part of counterinsurgency operations. In other words, women – American, Iraqi and Afghan – are perceived as the ‘custodians’ of knowledge necessary to winning the war and, simultaneously, as ‘conduits’ for the successful communication and manipulation of that knowledge. I draw on this framing of ‘custodians and conduits’ to interrogate the gendered dimensions of four programmes which focused on female engagement.

I develop three key insights into gendered practices of counterinsurgency. First, I build on the feminist argument that the conception of gender which underpins the work of counterinsurgency scholar–practitioners ties gender to the liberal logics of humanitarianism and war. This constructs the political subjectivities of both Iraqi and Afghan women and US female counterinsurgents in two necessarily contradictory ways: as highly agential and influential *and* as in need of masculine protection. Counterinsurgency’s construction of American, Iraqi and Afghan women as strategic assets *and* as vulnerable subjects pays little attention to the complex experiences of women, instead privileging their usefulness for Western narratives of war wherein they are cast as ‘wholly socio-economic beings, divested of politics or ethics’ (Khalili, 2011: 1477).

Second, I demonstrate that the gendered knowledges of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are constituted and regulated by affective and embodied norms and rules. As first-hand accounts show, the bodies of US female soldiers and Afghan and Iraqi women were highly regulated and the focus of the military gaze. Identifying women as military and strategic assets, gendered counterinsurgency relied on embodied knowledge as well as emotional labour. Women were presumed to be both more receptive to and more capable of carrying out the relationship-building, empathetic engagement and emotional support necessary for population-centric counterinsurgency.

Third, I argue that the discursive construction of ‘winning hearts and minds’ contributes to rendering invisible the violences of gendered counterinsurgency practices. This invisibility is

central to persuading domestic publics that population-centric counterinsurgency is a 'kinder' and 'gentler' type of war (see McBride and Wibben, 2012: 203). It is crucial for those participants who internalized the dominant narrative of humanitarian activity in such a way as to erase or bracket their participation in war understood as violent invasion and occupation. I argue that the state mobilizes a relational ontology (grounded in the emotional labour and empathy by the 'self' required for 'understanding the Afghan and Iraqi other') for strategic ends. This emotional labour 'called for the successful *expression* of care' (Mesok, 2015: 69) and the effective emotional self-regulation by US female soldiers and civilians. The state is unconcerned that the transactional quality of these interactions may create an ontological dissonance for those implementing strategy on the ground. Harnessing the language and performance of a relational ontology to the strategic political and military framework of the state serves to render the violence of such interactions less visible.

The following sections explore the gendered forms of knowledge production adopted by the US military as part of the counterinsurgency strategy developed during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The first section discusses methodological aspects and challenges underpinning the research. The second section reviews the literature regarding the intersection of gender and counterinsurgency and looks at opposing perspectives on the role that culture plays in the context of war. The third section offers an overview of the four programmes addressed in the article: Team Lioness, Female Engagement Teams, Human Terrain System and Cultural Support Teams. The fourth and fifth sections analyse the ways in which American, Iraqi and Afghan women are constituted as 'custodians and conduits' of knowledge. The article concludes by considering the implications of making female engagement integral to militarized forms of knowledge production.

Methodological underpinnings

This research draws on existing scholarship on gender and counterinsurgency, alongside a variety of sources which relate to each of the four programmes such as official and internal military documents, news reports, military memoirs, documentaries and films. I also conducted semi-structured interviews and visits to US military sites to contextualize these sources. From this process, patterns of gendered and affective knowledge, relationships and experience began to emerge across the programmes. Site visits included Fort Leavenworth in Kansas where HTS training took place, the US Army Women's Museum at Fort Lee in Virginia which houses material on the Female Engagement Teams and Cultural Support Teams, Marine Corps University at Quantico in Virginia, and Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama. I conducted 35 semi-structured interviews relating to HTS with access primarily developed through direct contact with relevant participants and gatekeepers, as well as through snowballing. Interviews took place with civilian and military participants in HTS, some of whom worked alongside Female Engagement Teams and US Special Forces, anthropologists and journalists. The interviews focused on HTS, but participants' wider military interactions reveal areas of overlap in terms of gendered forms of knowledge production and therefore provide insights into the military's female engagement strategy.¹

It is 'through this incremental process, going back and forth between new discoveries and theoretical reflections, that the research evolves: local conceptions of [knowledge] now appear also structured by power relations' (Lai and Roccu, 2019: 79). Gendered relations are revealed as integral to the forms of knowledge production engaged with by the military. The tensions

represented by the relational ontology adopted by the state also become evident, relying as it does on the genuine emotional investment in female engagement work by US female counterinsurgents participating in the programmes. For myself as the researcher, entering into the social processes and structures which constitute the self-understanding of those participating both revealed – through the intellectual process – and occluded – through the embodied experience – the ontological logic underpinning such a position. This reflects the challenges of navigating the fluidity of insider–outsider research relations (Ben-Ari and Levy, 2014).

Lee Ann Fujii notes that positionality in the field ‘is relational and context dependent, not fixed or absolute’ (2018: 19). As a white, British academic, this shaped the relationships that developed within interviews with current or former academics/researchers/PhD holders as described by one interviewee: ‘this quick interview between you and me, you’ll get lots, but in part that’s only because we have so much, as part of, you know, an anglophone and scholarly community, there’s tons of context in common that makes it possible’ (Author interview E). This identity helped to facilitate access in some contexts while in others – such as engaging with military personnel – it was at times perceived with varying degrees of suspicion not least because I had no experience of military service. As a female researcher, the gendered and embodied dimensions of research relationships were highlighted by a female interviewee who reflected on the insider–outsider capacity for empathy in the research process.

Well then I was just thinking about the empathy of you, right? Your empathy in this, to the stories, to the people, to the narrative, and then that can turn into bias so that then turn into, ‘oh no, am I too attached?’ And now I am thinking . . . where again, as females we were able to talk to female Marines, and you’ve got a lot of emotional stories . . . I cannot now divorce myself of thinking that these stories are very important and I want to tell them, but I think again, from an outside point of view or even within the Marine Corps, the questions they would ask, the doubt they would cast on this story or that perspective is very different than I cast, as somebody who a) listened to them, b) saw them cry, c) is a female, d) kind of understands some of that helplessness on an emotional, empathetic level. But, as a researcher, it’s hard because in the moment, the best thing is to be empathetic with that person. But in the analysis, you can get easily get critiqued for having too much empathy. (Author interview B)

As Carol Cohn (1987) described, the researcher can become drawn into the discursive structures that shape insider knowledge and perspectives. In a similar fashion, what I perceived to be a lack of recognition that seeking to ‘understand others’ through these programmes was not only integral to the logic of war but might constitute a form of epistemic violence, led to an emerging dissonance between my intellectual understanding and my affective experience. As a researcher then, by engaging openly with the experiences of those I spoke with, I also experienced a seductiveness at work within the liberal and military perspectives that served to depoliticize, normalize or ‘soften’ participation in war. This was intensified by the layering of personal and value-driven motives and beliefs articulated across individual stories. While each narrative pushed back in various ways against the dominant critiques of these programmes, frequently challenging my assumptions, they also pointed to the ways in which forms of military knowledge production are highly complex sets of gendered, embodied and affective relations. The challenge lies in engaging with the integrity and agency of counterinsurgents’ micro-narratives while also making visible the politics and dynamics of power that weave together the discourse around cultural understanding of others. This reveals a process of intersubjectivity: the discursive and affective structures of war are sufficiently powerful to pull in both subject and researcher, thus shaping the subjectivity of the researcher and constituting the subject–researcher relationship.

Gender and population-centric counterinsurgency

In this section I develop an overview of the critiques of population-centric counterinsurgency which engages with some of the ways gender, sociocultural knowledge and counterinsurgency have been framed in the literature.² According to retired US Army Colonel Christopher Kolenda, population-centric counterinsurgency is

pretty cold blooded. . . what we are really trying to understand is how people make choices for themselves and their communities out of self-interest. We want to shape those interests to align with our interests of stability and defeating the insurgency. (2012: 68)

Central to contemporary debates on counterinsurgency is the argument that increased sociocultural knowledge is a necessary component for military and strategic success. Characterizing much of the literature is a belief that it enables a more ethical and effective war with regards to reducing casualties amongst civilians and the military (e.g. US Army Marine Corps, 2007; Kelly et al., 2010; Kilcullen, 2006; Lamb et al., 2013; McChrystal, 2009; McFate, 2005; McFate and Laurence, 2015; Scales, 2006). Advocates assume that a lack of sociocultural knowledge is at the heart of the military failures and is, consequently, the vehicle for its successful resolution. As Major General Robert Scales (2009 [2006]: 28) declared,

a curtain of cultural ignorance continues to separate the good intentions of the American soldiers from Iraqis of good will. . . The military of the future must be able to go to war with enough cultural knowledge to thrive in an alien environment. Empathy will become a weapon. Soldiers must gain the ability to move comfortably among alien cultures, to establish trust and cement relationships that can be exploited in battle.

There is a substantial literature that explicitly challenges these claims and seeks to draw attention to the ways in which the focus on sociocultural knowledge in counterinsurgency discourse obscures the continuing violence of war. These scholars suggest that the ‘softer’ and ‘gentler’ representation of counterinsurgency serves political and strategic purposes (see Belcher, 2018; Bell, 2018; Bhattacharyya, 2008; Brown, 2008; Cohen, 2010; Duncanson, 2013; Dyvik, 2014; González, 2008; Gregory, 2008; Gusterson, 2007; Kelly et al., 2010; Khalili, 2011; Lutz, 2009; McBride and Wibben, 2012; Owens, 2015; Zehfuss, 2012). On the one hand, they argue, it makes the war more palatable to domestic audiences at home. On the other hand, they note the complex set of ways in which this shift contributed to coding counterinsurgency as gendered and in making war more ‘intimate’ through the reconceptualization of conventional battle spaces to include the homes, villages, relationships, economic practices and cultural and social norms of local communities. They argue that the failure to adequately address the root causes of the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan is not because soldiers failed to understand how to communicate in culturally appropriate ways with civilians, but because US and coalition forces were actively engaged in occupying another people’s country (Lutz, 2009).

What the critics of the ‘hearts and minds’ approach point to is that social and cultural knowledge of others – whether gathered through civilian or military actors – supports an Orientalist mode of knowing which is essentially a ‘Western hegemonic mode of interpreting “other” peoples as morally, technically, culturally, and/or racially inferior that effectively sustains the Western observer’s superior position’ (Feldman, 2009: 91). This desire for intimate knowledge of the lives of others is ‘conditional, forcefully imposed, and unlikely to be interested in thick description’ (Gregory, 2008: 15). The lenses applied to this task have often constructed local communities and lives as ‘alien,

strange and distant', a continuation of classic Orientalist constructions of a timeless and ahistorical 'space of the exotic and the bizarre, the monstrous and the pathological' (Gregory, 2008: 17). Illustrating this discursive construction, HTS member AnnaMaria Cardinalli described how her team was 'flying toward the most remote tribal badlands of Afghanistan, the outermost limits of Western presence' where 'the Marines had just begun to secure the dangerous area, which had been considered untameable for countless generations' (2013: 15). The *Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams* described conditions for women in rural areas in Iraq as roughly comparable to those found in the late 1700s in the West (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 61) and rural Afghanistan was described as 'medieval' (2011: 78). This assumes a linear path of development for which the West functions as the exemplar towards which all other societies and cultures must strive.

Concern with the emotional and embodied terrain of women has a long history as part of strategies of pacification and colonialism. The focus on humanitarian aid runs hand in hand with military attention to 'women as a "tactical idea"' (Kinsella, 2019: 40), drawing on counterinsurgency doctrine authored by French military officer and scholar David Galula (2006) best known for his development of counterinsurgency theory and practice during the Algerian war of independence. European colonial powers consistently paid attention to the development of women and children, focusing not just on education and basic welfare, but also seeking to transmit 'modern values' and deploying colonial women to carry out such activities (Feichtinger et al., 2012: 41). Between January 1957 and late 1959 the 'emancipation' strategy instituted by the joint military–civilian regime in Algiers sought to 'liberate' Muslim women 'from ignorance and the crushing weight of patriarchal domination, measures that included unveiling campaigns, improved access to schooling, youth training, joint European-Muslim women's circles, extension of the vote, and a new family law' (MacMaster, 2007: 94, 2009; Seferdjeli, 2005). Like coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, French military units saw the female teams as necessary 'enablers' – or 'conduits' – that complemented their security actions.

Population-centric counterinsurgency's focus on the social realm through its attention to the national, tribal and family households both constitutes and reveals its gendered dimensions (Owens, 2015). Owens directs our attention to the gendered governance of the household and family relations, to the regulation of the domestic sphere, to the physical walls and boundaries of the household, and to the minimization of politics as it is collapsed into the ordering of relations structured predominantly by culture, 'tradition' and religion within provinces and regions. Dominating the narrative is a paternalistic focus on progress towards self-government through civilian–military partnership and advising practices (Welland, 2015), as well as feminized encounters taking place within the domestic space of the home or carefully curated public spaces that are constituted by affective dynamics and gendered bodies. Gendered assumptions underpin the distribution of labour in counterinsurgency. Women are perceived to be more culturally sensitive and therefore better suited to the emotional labour required by gendered practices of counterinsurgency (Khalili, 2011). Evidence of this continuing belief comes from a male Lieutenant Colonel in the Army, who reported that

[o]n any given day in Iraq, an American soldier might be asked to search travellers at a roadside check point, comfort distraught mothers whose children have been killed or injured, search a woman's quarters in a strictly Islamic household, or assist civilians whose homes have been destroyed. Given the traditional role of women as peacekeepers and humanitarians in their own homes, it is not illogical to believe that a woman could perform each of these tasks as well, if not better. (Khalili, 2011: 1483)

What tends to remain unquestioned in the logic of gendered counterinsurgency and female engagement is the assumption that family ties and relationships may be easily broken by ‘enlightened self-interest’ (Gehman, 2017: 27) if women are approached correctly in a culture for which family relationships are central, despite the context of insecurity, violence and ever-present threats of violence which Iraqi and Afghan women and families experience. I turn now to look in more detail at the four programmes underpinning a strategy of female engagement.

‘Women’s work’ in US counterinsurgency programmes

The four programmes – Team Lioness, Female Engagement Teams, the Human Terrain System and Cultural Support Teams – all shared a belief that gender was a significant dimension of successful counterinsurgency operations. They understood gender to be important in the collection of social and cultural knowledge which could be harnessed to the military mission. They were also ‘feminized’ missions, focusing not just on ‘adding women’ but on operationalizing gender through the social and cultural knowledge, emotions, and connection considered to be integral to the relational aspects of understanding and trust-building. This gendered account of the work was reinforced by many in the military who saw it as ‘just fluff’ (Author interview F). While men and women connected to these programmes faced questions about the value of the work, women carried a double burden, which was experienced differently depending on additional intersecting factors such as race and military/civilian status, having to prove themselves of equal worth because of the gendered assumptions attributed to them (Author interviews A, B, D, G, H).³ In a ‘hyper-masculine, hyper-gendered’ environment (Author interview K), women were judged as to whether they played the ‘gender card to try and get extra benefits’ (Author interview D). Military and civilian women were ‘doing an awful lot of presentation management in the Goffman sense. Because they wanted to be perceived as useful but not weak’ (Author interview, C). Below I summarize the development and function of each programme to illustrate the gendered and feminized dimensions that constituted them.

Team Lioness

The Lioness teams were all-female teams drawn from auxiliary army units and attached to Marine combat units in Iraq from 2003 until 2010. Initial Lioness teams had no official selection or training criteria other than being female (Beals, 2010; Gehman, 2017: 11). Their deployment arose out of ‘unforeseen circumstances’ whereby male soldiers were prevented from physically searching Iraqi women. As Gunnery Sgt. Jeanette Fulgencio indicated, the ‘mission of the Lioness program is to eliminate potential threats brought in by women’ (Aranda, 2008). Work focused on searching Iraqi women for hidden weapons and explosive vests and making sure that they were not men who had disguised themselves by wearing a burqa. Those who served on Team Lioness understood that the only reason they were on missions was because they were women. The Marines ‘needed females to go out with them on the missions to help calm the women and children’ (*Lioness*, 2008). They ‘gave the kids candy, toys, school supplies so, in the beginning, the army didn’t look so bad to them’ (*Lioness*, 2008). Prior to January 2013, women were not allowed to serve in ground combat roles in the US military. Nevertheless, these women were on the front line serving with Marine units, carrying weapons and perceived as soldiers by civilians who encountered them, despite not having received adequate combat training (*Lioness*, 2008; Vavrus, 2017: 78).

Female Engagement Teams

In 2009, Female Engagement Teams (FETs) were established in Afghanistan by the US Marine Corps, building on what was perceived to be the success of Lioness teams in Iraq. By 2012, 14 NATO countries and allies were employing over 149 FETs in Afghanistan (Gehman, 2017: 11). The Marines disbanded the last FETs in Afghanistan in 2012 and the wider programme ended in 2014 with the drawdown of troops from Afghanistan. Utilizing the ambivalence of gendered subjectivities in the military context, the FETs were set up in the belief that women would be 'extended the respect shown to men' but be 'granted the access to home and family normally reserved to women' (Pottinger et al., 2010: 2). It had become recognized by some within the Marines that the military were alienating whole villages through their interactions with women during house raids and it was believed that the missions could be more effectively carried out by female soldiers engaging with Afghan women and children (Pottinger et al., 2010).

Building on the earlier concept of ad hoc Lioness teams, the FETs institutionalized the gendered dimension of cultural knowledge for military goals and their central purpose was to find out what the concerns and needs of Afghan women were. The belief underpinning the FETs was that 'Afghan women sat at the center of a complex web of family relationships and had a significant effect on the population' (Lemmon, 2015: 11). Describing the cultural and emotional work required, the *Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams* notes that '[w]omen are a critical yet often overlooked demographic in COIN strategy. This is a key demographic in gaining popular support; however, *engaging women is a delicate, refined process* that requires a keen understanding of cultural sensitivities' (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 59–60, emphasis added).

FETs were asked to 'build trusted relationships to yield information of critical importance' (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 73; see also Rivers, 2018). The means of doing this: small talk with women, conversations about motherhood, family and children, drinking tea, and so on, were all intended to facilitate more targeted conversations about social dynamics, local economies, needs and support requirements. These conversations, in turn, were expected to lead to a greater willingness of local men and women to provide information about the insurgents. While the gendered rationale for the Lioness teams brought into Iraq in 2003 responded to a situational need for searching women, the development of the FETs was a deliberate strategy to gain access to domestic spaces and their associated knowledges.

Human Terrain System

The Human Terrain System began as an experimental sociocultural-focused programme in 2006, born out of the strategic failures of the US military and its coalition partners to comprehend and fight the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The organizational genesis of HTS lay in the efforts to stem the successful use by insurgents of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) which were inflicting significant casualties on US forces. Steve Fondacaro and Montgomery McFate, the founders of HTS, argued that knowledge of the 'human terrain' could be more effective than technological solutions to IEDs (McFate and Laurence, 2015). This idea was supported by military leaders such as Major General Robert Scales (2006) and General Petraeus (US Army Marine Corps, 2007). HTS recognized the significance of the role of women in local communities. The HTS handbook noted that ideally one member of the Human Terrain Team will 'be a female (to allow the team access to the 50% of the population frequently overlooked in military operations)' (Finney, 2008: 11).

HTS embedded teams of mixed reserve or retired military officers and civilian social scientists with US, Coalition and ISAF forces in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2007 onwards. The term 'human terrain' comprises 'the entire spectrum of society and culture' whereupon the 'population is the primary battlefield' (Finney, 2008: 19) and the programme was premised on the idea that better sociocultural knowledge of local communities would save civilian and military lives by reducing the need to use lethal force. Closely reflecting army counterinsurgency doctrine,⁴ the HTS handbook indicated that 'valid and objective information' on 'social groups and their interests, beliefs, leaders, and the drivers of individual and group behavior is needed to conduct effective counterinsurgency operations' (Finney, 2008: 3). HTS teams would support the

[brigade] commander's decision-making process by recommending options for the use of non-lethal effects to build trust, form partnerships and apply informed cultural knowledge to problem solving and building solutions, all while mapping the human terrain of the unit area of operations as well as the local populations. (Finney, 2008: 13)

HTS objectives were to be achieved through the application of social science research methods and would 'improve operational decisions and chances for mission success' through 'increased understanding of Iraqi citizens' physical and economic security needs', 'increased understanding of local ideological, religious, and tribal allegiances' and the 'avoidance of unintended second order effects resulting from a lack of understanding of the local human terrain' (McFate and Laurence, 2015: 8–9).

Cultural Support Teams

The Special Operations Forces' female engagement programme was formally established in 2010. Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) were all-female teams attached to US special operations units in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2014. CSTs were explicitly linked to intelligence gathering and kinetic functions through their attachment to US Special Forces. Referring to them as 'enablers' who were 'attached' to Special Forces teams was the way in which the prohibition of women serving in ground combat operations was navigated prior to 2013. Whereas the FETs were 'used to soften coalition forces' footprint as they moved through an area' (Katt, 2014: 109), CSTs were either assigned to 'direct action' teams working alongside the counterterrorism-focused Rangers units on night raids of Afghan homes, or with the more 'indirect action' teams in rural areas where Green Berets forged relationships with local people and their leaders. The CSTs working with the Rangers would be responsible for

building crucial relationships with women on the scene that would reveal the information needed to help capture insurgents. This work would be done inside the homes of Afghan women, and would take place in the midst of night raids aimed at capturing the weapons makers, fighters, organizers, funders, and insurgency leaders with whom the women lived as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, and grandmothers. (Lemmon, 2015: 98)

The women working alongside the Green Berets would be part of VSOs, or Village Stability Operations (Lemmon, 2015: 17). The idea behind VSOs was that as security, local governance and stability improved, local communities would be more likely to support their government and the US forces and less likely to back the insurgency. Much is made of the physical superiority and 'alpha' status of these women (Lemmon, 2015). At the same time, reminding us of the gendered subjectivities constantly at play, CSTs were told that '[w]e are not at war to pass out blankets and hugs. I need you to find out where the bad guys are, as quick as you can' (Lemmon, 2015).

Female counterinsurgents as ‘custodians and conduits’ of knowledge

‘Using female soldiers to interact with local Afghan civilians may be the best-kept secret weapon available to the Brigade Combat Team to gain acceptance and information from the local civilian population.’

Commander’s Guide to Female Engagement Teams (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 60)

In what follows I focus on the ways in which US female counterinsurgents were positioned as ‘custodians’ of embodied and affective knowledge and assumed to be capable of empathizing with Iraqi and Afghan women. This taps into a long history of the gendered skills and duties performed by women in the US Army. FETs were often referred to in the language of humanitarianism and affect; the ‘softer’ side of war associated with ‘hearts and minds’, access to women and children, and the private sphere of the home. Underpinning this role was an affective regime stipulating a wide range of emotional and embodied requirements. In Mesok’s discussion of FETs as an ‘affective technology of war’, she argues that the product of this affective labour is that Afghan women were supposedly more comfortable when in proximity to foreign women and that this, in turn, led to greater military access to information otherwise unavailable to male soldiers (2015). This is reflected in the words of a female American Military Police Captain who said of Afghan women that ‘[t]hey can look into the face of another woman and hopefully know that everything is going to be alright . . . they can trust us more than they would trust a male soldier’ (Jones, 2010).

Among the many skills identified to be a FET was the need for ‘a sturdy heart when becoming a witness to some of the most tragic of situations’ (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 71). Advice on emotional labour for female soldiers is considerable. In her recommendations to FETs, Dr. LisaRe Brooks Babin, the FET training curriculum developer, recognizes that ‘[e]ngagements can get emotional’ and advises women not to ‘be afraid to show your sincere feelings but do try to stay in control’ (Gehman, 2017, Annex B: 14). Similarly, she notes that ‘[Afghan] Women are illiterate but NOT stupid . . . Be very careful to not show negative reactions when talking with them unless the emotional expression is appropriate to convey that you are empathizing with their story’ (Gehman, 2017, Annex B: 8).

Much attention is paid to physical presentation, both to signal gender to Afghan men and women and to protect female counterinsurgents from being targeted by the Taliban. One member of a Cultural Support Team describes her experience:

she removed her helmet to make herself look less scary, and make it clear she was a woman, too. One of the children immediately stopped crying, and Amber draped a teal-colored cotton scarf over what she now called her ‘combat braids’: two long, blond plaits of hair that extended from just above her ears to her mid-shoulders. The higher-ups had told the CSTs they should be able to prove quickly and uncontroversibly that they were female . . . this would put the Afghan women at ease, which in turn might encourage them to speak freely and share valuable information. (Lemmon, 2015: 191)

Similarly to the CSTs, FET standard operating procedures required female soldiers to remove their helmets when security permitted and were advised to remove their gloves and eyewear in order to ‘present yourself as friendly and happy’ (Gehman, 2017, Annex B: 2). Similar requirements were made of female soldiers in Iraq where a women’s initiative programme was started in 2009 by Multi-National Division-North to empower Iraqi women and improve their lives: ‘Only after the female officers shed their gear and opened their souls to the inquisitive questions of the Iraqi women were they accepted as an equal and female’ (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 6).

The task of female engagement was a 'distinctly feminine' one (Mattson, 2012: 16). The role of Lionesses in Iraq was to 'sit out there at the traffic control points [of cordon and search operations] comforting the females' (*Lioness*, 2008) and ensuring military access to the bodies of Iraqi women for security purposes. Lioness specialist Rebecca Nava attributed her ability to get 'civilians to cooperate with her to her gendered presentation, "just being softer, prettier than the guys", but also to her willingness to listen empathically and with kindness' (Mesok, 2015: 65). Female soldiers were told they should not be seen 'smoking and joking with their male counterparts, seen being touched and touching men' otherwise they might be perceived as a bad influence and barred from accessing the women in that village (Gehman, 2017, Annex B: 18). Female soldiers were perceived to be less threatening than male soldiers and able to 'soften interactions' between local civilians and US soldiers because, unlike the men, it was assumed they came to 'help' rather than 'fight' (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 5).

Reflecting broader gendered constraints on women's participation in the military, FET members continued to remain within a logic of masculine protection (Young, 2003). Female US service members had to be shielded from certain kinds of men: 'Afghan security forces have to be watched and prevented from coming along on FET missions as Peeping Toms' (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 72). Major Rodrigues headed military police and force protection operations for the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team and worked on FET missions. While on a cordon and search mission to find a Taliban suspect hiding in a local compound, Rodrigues reported that even though she outranked most of the soldiers on the mission, 'men always entered homes first during a mission' (Rivers, 2018: 2) and US Army regulations prohibited female soldiers from leaving the base without a male combat soldier accompanying them.

The female body was important not just in the way it was dressed but also in its sexual objectification. The *Commander's Guide* encouraged female soldiers to engage young boys because it was assumed that '[a]dolescent males have a natural desire to impress females . . . Using this desire to interact with and impress females can be advantageous to US military forces when done respectfully to both the female soldier and the adolescent Afghan males' (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 63). In this way, women not only continued to experience additional barriers to acceptance and participation in the armed forces, alongside endemic sexual harassment on US bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they were also specifically identified as a strategic asset to the military through their own sexualization. This can be seen in Captain Matt Pottinger's description of early FET encounters with Afghans. He writes that

here, as elsewhere, the presence of female Marines softened and facilitated the interaction with local men and children. One gentlemen with a gray beard who opened his home to the FET put it this way: 'Your men come to fight, but we know the women are here to help.' (With a sheepish grin, he admitted that the female guests were also 'good for my old eyes'). (Pottinger, 2010: 4)

These sexualized assumptions regarding desire and the female body were internalized by women participating in these programmes. Dr. LisaRe Brooks Babin advises FETs: 'DO NOT wear the combat shirt! It is too revealing for most soldiers . . . You may have to engage with Afghan men along with the women and a tight/sweaty combat shirt will be embarrassing for everyone present' (Gehman, 2017, Annex B: 5). HTS member AnnaMaria Cardinalli wrote of an interaction with Afghan men who responded negatively to the presence of two Western women: 'I also found their reaction somewhat surprising, as I had expected that they would enjoy the opportunity to encounter foreign women, who were both culturally permissible and accessible for them to interact with and touch' (2013: 26).

Female soldiers were also positioned as ‘conduits’ for the transmission of US narratives to locals and for the discovery and collection of local knowledge from Afghan and Iraqi women. FETs were tasked with developing ‘trust-based, enduring, and dynamic information sharing relationships’ to ‘support the battle space owners’ priorities’ (McChrystal, 2010: 3). They were represented as a conduit to communicate the ‘powerful and positive’ master narrative regarding the good intentions of Americans and their desire to provide security and help families/villages (see Jones, 2010; Mattson, 2012). Staff Sgt. Chanise Morgan, FET team member with the 4th BCT (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, indicated that her team allowed the unit to

access human intelligence from Afghan women to further stop the enemy from using the cultural restrictions of not being able to talk to women, so we can stop the trafficking of weapons, ammunitions . . . *We’re basically bridging that gap so they can’t use women to do the wrong things.* (Mattson, 2012: 21, emphasis added)

Many Lionesses, CSTs, FETs and female HTS members represented themselves as being conduits for hope for Afghan and Iraqi women to take courage and learn from, seeing themselves as conduits for a message of social, economic and personal empowerment (Dyvik, 2014: 421; Mesok, 2015: 65–67; Author interviews B, I). For Marine Sergeant Sheena Adams, ‘giving hope to women and children half a world away also felt like a calling’ (Rivers, 2018: 49). Adams thought that ‘walking through villages side by side with men – holding the same weapons, wearing the same gear – would show girls that the female body didn’t need to be a prison sentence and that women’s lives could be full of possibilities’ (Rivers, 2018: 49). SPC Mary Bobb, who was deployed as a FET in Afghanistan reflected commonly held views that ‘[We]’re hoping we can be a voice for them and express how they feel and what they want and what they’re not getting’ (Lawrence, 2011).

Afghan women as ‘custodians and conduits’ of knowledge

‘Men, women, and children are part of the triangle of knowledge that must be targeted for information collection. In Afghanistan, we observe rather consistent themes. Men interpret information and tell you what they think you want to hear. Women see and hear what goes on behind the walls.’

Commander’s Guide to Female Engagement Teams, (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011).

As indicated in the previous section, US servicewomen were both privileged subjects in the field and simultaneously objects of military strategy. I turn now to a similar tension which emerges in the way in which Afghan and Iraqi women were constructed by the military gaze as both ‘custodians’ and ‘conduits’ of local knowledge. There are two key representations of local women that are dominant in and constitutive of Western narratives of war in Afghanistan. On the one hand, women were represented as passive victims and innocents, subject to gendered violence and oppression and requiring Western compassion, intervention and assistance. On the other hand, Afghan women were represented as custodians of local knowledge and as persuadable conduits of information and intelligence, ready and waiting to be enlisted into ISAF’s war against Taliban insurgents. In this vein, Kilcullen argued that ‘[w]omen are . . . influential in forming the social networks that insurgents use for support’ (2006: 106). Women were represented as the ‘custodians’ of the local knowledge required by American and ISAF forces to identify and locate the insurgents in their homes and communities. As a CST member indicated, ‘We could find the terrorists [that the Rangers] were going after much quicker, and we were much more accurate usually because the women and children knew what was going on in the community’ (Tracy, 2016). By being separated from men, Female Engagement Teams would thus be able to find common ground as allies and persuade them

to share this information, often in return for the provision of temporary health care, hygiene kits, food, school supplies and humanitarian assistance.

Counterinsurgency understood the private world of Afghan women to be distinct from the public sphere inhabited by Afghan men. This 'hidden' world was represented as waiting to be discovered and as key to military success, bringing Afghan women, children and, inevitably, men, onto the side of the Afghan government (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2014: 2). CST member, Master Sgt. Lita Fraley, noted that '[w]omen have a larger understanding of the needs in their community, [and] when the Army wants to understand the needs of an area, these women [in the communities] become a great source of information' (USASOC Public Affairs, 2011). However, Azarbaijani-Moghaddam cautions that this belief 'does not reflect the roles of the majority of Afghan women in post-war Afghan society' (2014: 35). This homogenizing attitude towards Afghan women spilled over into the approach adopted by FETs who interpreted much of what they saw as 'women's influence', without a deeper understanding of the nuances of gendered relations and social interactions in different regions of Afghanistan. As Azarbaijani-Moghaddam writes, 'in one instance, the ability to sit and have a chat with a FET is seen as a sign of "firm control within the home"' (2014: 36). Azarbaijani-Moghaddam speaks of her experience as Cultural Advisor to the Commander of Regional Command-South (RC-S) in 2010 where she was asked to 'engage women in prominent Afghan families in Kandahar as potentially more representative and uncorrupted than the men, who were proving duplicitous' (2014: 33). This reiterates the gendered assumption that Afghan women were likely to be less corrupt or obstructive than men.

Just as gendered counterinsurgency focuses on the embodiment of US female counterinsurgents, so Iraqi and Afghan female bodies were also subject to intense gaze, with much attention paid to 'lifting the burka' to find the women underneath (Abu-Lughod 2002). The primary function of members of the Lioness programme was to be able to search Iraqi women's bodies to ensure that they were not male insurgents or carrying weapons (Aranda, 2008), while FET teams undertook training to search Afghan women and their homes (Mattson, 2012). Iraqi and Afghan women's bodies were also understood to fall within the logic of masculine protection, justifying the strategic need for female engagement. A common thread within female engagement reports that reflects women as both agential and as vulnerable subjects is the 'surprising' strength and resilience of women found 'beneath the veil'. As Hughes (2010) writes,

When Warrant Officer . . . lifted up the thin blue cloth of the burka, she would not have been surprised to see despair in the eyes of the woman underneath [. . .]. Instead, she ducked under the burka and saw the vibrant smile and heard the giggle of a vivacious young woman, who, like most Afghan women, is as curious about American female soldiers as the female soldiers are about them.

Irrespective of the impact of physical, material or emotional losses experienced across decades of war, or the threat of violent reprisal that Afghan women may have experienced by virtue of meeting with Female Engagement Teams, they were seen as 'conduits': as a 'means of spreading GIRoA and [ISAF] friendly messages or critical information' (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: 66). As with American female counterinsurgents, Afghan women were understood as 'custodians' of local knowledge and a strategic asset: 'We're here to help them. The more information they give us, the more we can help them push the [insurgents] out of here so they can live a better life' (Jones, 2010). Once again, what remains inadequately addressed in this logic, which represents Afghan women as both agential and as vulnerable subjects, is the assumption that the medium of engagement by female counterinsurgents is what will enable family ties and relationships to be broken in acts of enlightened self-interest.

Conclusion

An underlying premise of population-centric counterinsurgency is that the human terrain can be made ‘visible, knowable, and malleable’ (Khalili, 2011: 1477). Often referred to in military language as ‘combat multipliers’, all four programmes demonstrate the representation of women as a ‘new strategic asset’ to establish sociocultural knowledge necessary to support the military mission (Pratt, 2013: 778). This illustrates a gendered, instrumental and extractive approach to knowledge in order to provide military gains for US and ISAF forces. At the same time, this form of knowledge production is perceived by those participating in it to be vital to the well-being and future of the Afghan and Iraqi people as demonstrated by Sgt. 1st Class Sawyer Alberl, a FET team leader who said that ‘[t]he FET mission is so critical that if I had to exchange blood for it, I would. . . . Women find strength in other women’s presence’ (Hughes, 2010). Reflecting the tension between the genuine emotional commitment of individuals and the instrumental performance of care – both of which are essential for gendered counterinsurgency to be successful – Captain Johanna Smoke, an intelligence officer deployed as a FET team leader to Zabul Province, Afghanistan, in June 2013, described how she had to be two different people, namely

a nation builder who brought medical care to hurting women, held sick babies, and helped repair facilities that the Taliban had destroyed as well as an Army captain who manipulated some of the same women she was helping in order to gain intelligence. The duality often made her feel guilty. . . . But she also knew that filling intelligence reports is what, ultimately, was going to change these women’s lives. They were participating, without knowing it, in their own liberation. (Rivers, 2018: 151)

Making visible the gendered, emotional and embodied labour of counterinsurgency helps to reveal the complex political relationships and emotional investments integral to these encounters through which knowledge of the ‘other’ is sought. Those who volunteered for these roles to win ‘hearts and minds’ on the ground often indicated a sincere belief in and commitment to the rapport, trust-building, understanding and knowledge gained through their encounters with local women. This emotional investment is necessary for gender to be effective as a strategic asset capable of ‘softening’ and mitigating the worst effects of war and occupation. Situating this felt sincerity within the structures of coloniality, patriarchy and capitalism of modern society allows the tension present between the humanitarian commitments of ordinary people to help those suffering and their involvement in the violence of highly controversial wars to sit alongside each other. Reflected in many female engagement voices was a commitment to making a difference: ‘I wanted to bring my skills to bear as much as I possibly could on . . . Well, first and foremost, protecting and trying to mitigate the damage’ (Author interview J).

The strategic goals underpinning gendered counterinsurgency mean that despite the emotional investments and the often genuinely care-full interactions of individual Lioness/HTS/FET/CSTs members, the framing of their encounters cannot escape the logic of instrumental reasoning through which it is formally represented by the military and the state. In what I argue is a necessary ontological paradox, the language and action of trust-building and relationships is deployed by the military within an orientation to knowledge that is ‘cold-blooded’ (Kolenda, 2012: 68) and self-interested. Knowledge of others is established predominantly through transactional orientations to relationships and is intended to better shape the behaviours of the target population. This orientation to knowledge of others places relationality at the service of the military mission and national security agenda. They are not encounters of equals: female soldiers and civilians do not usually spend extended periods of time with local

women in their communities, learning their values and their language, and building trusting, reciprocal relationships. They are present in communities with weapons and represent the memory, symbolism and potential for kinetic force/violence. Local women remain the object of counterinsurgency's gaze while female counterinsurgents both facilitate and internalize that gaze. Ultimately, recognizing the policy of female engagement as central to forms of knowledge production reveals the extent to which the violences of war rely on a complex set of gendered and affective relations.

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Notes

1. It is important to note that the role and understanding of sociocultural knowledge, cultural competency and counterinsurgency is characterized by a '[US] service-specific dialogue and history' (Author interview C) and cannot be subsumed into a homogenous narrative.
2. Wider questions also arise concerning the relationship between the social sciences and the military, and the role of gender, patriarchy and militarism shaping American identity.
3. This is also based on my observations from a visit to the Army Women's Museum at Fort Lee, Virginia.
4. Montgomery McFate, one of the architects of HTS, also played a role in the writing of US Army Marine Corps (2007).

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