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Watermelons & Weddings: Making Women, Peace and Security ‘Relevant’ at NATO through (Re)telling Stories of Success

Abstract

This article analyses how the Women, Peace and Security agenda is made ‘relevant’ at the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) through the (re)telling of stories of success: one concerning watermelon and the other, the preparation for a wedding. The article provides a critical examination of how ‘new’ gender norms, in particular a ‘gender perspective’, are *normalised* within NATO, through narratives and storytelling, in ways that are political and problematic. The article highlights the lack of detailed gender analysis within official accounts, showing how the stories are used to communicate an understanding of success and progress that is less concerned with the detail of the actual events, but serves to develop a string of signifiers around ‘gender’, ‘women’ and ‘security’ which are familiar and relatable to their intended audience. The article offers a cautionary tale of how an organisation in the early stages of developing a ‘gender agenda’ can reinforce an essentialised and reductive understanding of the role and place of women within the military.

Key Words: Gender, NATO, Stories, Militarism, Women Peace and Security.

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has, since 2007, engaged with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325¹ (UNSCR 1325) and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in increasingly complex and multi-faceted ways². Officially, NATO's engagement began with a joint policy on implementing UNSCR 1325 with the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council³. In 2009, NATO adopted the Bi-Strategic Command Directive 40-1 (Bi-SCD 40-1) which endeavoured to 'integrate UNSCR 1325 and a gender perspective into the NATO command structure'⁴. NATO has an established Committee on Gender Perspectives, (NCGP) supported by the International Military Staff Office of the Gender Advisor, based at NATO HQ. Over the past decade NATO has actively recruited Gender Advisors and Gender Focal Points both within its institutions – at NATO HQ and Allied Command Operations and Allied Command Transformations – as well as deploying Gender Advisors to regions in which NATO is actively engaged, such as Afghanistan and Kosovo. In addition, there has been a significant growth in gender training and education initiatives throughout the alliance structures⁵. In 2012, the NATO Secretary General appointed a Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security⁶.

This article draws on data from official, publicly available documents and from elite interviews conducted with serving military personnel actively doing 'gender work' at NATO, to identify how the Women, Peace and Security agenda is both institutionalised and made relevant at NATO through the (re)telling of particular 'stories of success'. The article provides a critical examination of how 'new' gender norms⁷, in particular a 'gender perspective', are *normalised* within NATO, through narratives and storytelling, in ways that are political and problematic. These norms seek to be transformative but can, as the article will demonstrate – through processes of institutionalisation and normalisation – become de-radicalised and simply reform or entrench pre-existing understandings of gender relations.

The following quote from Nora - one of my interview participants - highlights an aspect of this process:

¹ United Nations, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), available: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1325> (Accessed June 2017)

² Katharine Wright, "NATO's adoption of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security: Making the Agenda a Reality," *International Political Science Review* Vol. 37 No. 3 (2016), pp. 350-361

³ EAPC (Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council). *Implementing UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security* (Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2007).

⁴ NATO, *Bi-SC Directive 40-1: Integrating UNSCR 1325 and Gender Perspectives into the NATO Command Structure including Measures for Protection during Armed Conflict* (2009), available: http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2009_09/20090924_Bi-SC_DIRECTIVE_40-1.pdf (Accessed June 2017)

⁵ Anita Schjølset, "Data on Women's Participation in NATO Forces and Operations", *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations* Vol. 39, No. 4 (2013), pp. 575-587; See also: NATO, *UNSCR 1325 Reload: An Analysis of National Action Reports to the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives from 1999-2013: Policies, Recruitment, Retention and Operations* (2015), available: http://www.nato.int/issues/nogp/meeting-records/2015/UNSCR1325-Reload_Report.pdf (Accessed June 2017)

⁶ NATO, *Press Release 102: NATO names Norwegian diplomat as Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security*, (28th August 2012), available: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_89583.htm (Accessed June 2017)

⁷ Tryggestad, T. L. "Trick or Treat? The UN and Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security", *Global Governance: a Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, Vol. 15 No. 4 (2009), pp. 539-557

1325 was the main document that started it all...I would say, if you build a house, it [1325] is the foundations, or maybe you can compare it with a tree, it is the main tree and then you have all the other resolutions as branches. Everything is linked to 1325...when you talk about gender awareness, you say “gender” [and it’s like], “oh yeah, 1325”. If you say [Resolution] 1960, people say: “what was that again?”

Nora's statement captures both the importance of UNSCR 1325 at NATO, and its ambiguity. Here, ‘gender’, ‘gender awareness’ and ‘1325’ become conflated and collapse into one another; UNSCR 1325 becomes a symbolic representation of progress, and the intricacies of the actual resolution - and associated resolutions - are excluded. As the analysis below demonstrates, in their short-hand use the terms ‘gender perspective’ and ‘1325’ and ‘Women, Peace and Security’ can become easily accepted, yet uncritical signifiers of progressive institutional change at NATO that keep certain ideas ‘in’ whilst filtering out more problematic, or nuanced perspectives. This is a common concern, highlighted in a variety of gender mainstreaming initiatives across a range of institutions. For example, Hilary Charlesworth exposes the limitations and reductionism in many institutional mainstreaming initiatives; whereby the need for measurability focuses attention on the position of women in statistical terms, but pays little attention to the ways in which ‘stereotypes about sex and gender’ affect and perpetuate gender inequality or ‘the complex ways in which gender itself is created and sustained by social and power relations’⁸. Organisational research has also highlighted how pre-existing structures and processes of organisations complicate the adoption of new gender norms⁹; producing what Jeff Hearn identifies as a ‘dual-agenda’¹⁰ - the tension between pre-existing organisational goals and objectives and those of the ‘new’ gender mainstreaming initiatives.

This tension was evident across the interviews, where a common theme articulated by the participants was the need for the Women, Peace and Security agenda (and for gender issues more broadly) to be made *relevant* to NATO and those in positions of power. Participants went to great lengths within their job roles to find the right language, to accommodate and allay particular concerns, and to align ‘gender work’ to NATO goals of increasing operational effectiveness and force multiplication¹¹. This desire – indeed the necessity – of making their work relevant impacted upon how they could speak about and conceptualise gender issues. By centralising the (re)telling of particular stories of success – one regarding the cultivation of watermelon, the other preparation for a wedding - this article focuses on one specific way in which the development and use of a gender perspective at NATO is being institutionalised via processes of repetition and (re)interpretation. NATO defines a gender perspective as:

⁸ Charlesworth, H. “Not waving but drowning: Gender mainstreaming and human rights in the United Nations”, *Harvard Human Rights Journal* Vol. 18 (2005) pp. 10-13

⁹ See, Benschop, Y. & M. Verloo ‘Sisyphus’ Sisters: Can Mainstreaming Escape the Genderedness of Organisations?’ *Journal of Gender Studies* Vol. 15 Issue 1(2006) pp. 19-33; Prugl, E. & A. Lustgarten ‘Mainstreaming Gender in International Organisations’ in J. Jaquette & G. Summerfield (eds.) *Women and Gender Equity in Development Theory and Practice Institutions*, London: Duke University Press (2006) pp. 53-70; Walby, S. ‘Gender Mainstreaming: Productive Tensions in Theory & Practice’, *Social Politics* Vol. 12 Issue 3 (2005) pp. 321-344; Ely, R. & D. Meyerson ‘Advancing Gender Equality in Organisations: The Challenge and Importance of Maintaining a Gender Narrative’ *Organisation* (2000) Vol. 7 pp. 589-609

¹⁰ Jeff Hearn, “On the Complexity of Feminist Interventions in Organisations”, *Organisation* Vol. 7 (2000), pp. 609-624

¹¹ Hurley, M. “Talking Gender, War and Security at NATO” in S. Ardener, F. Armitage and L. Sciama (ed.) *War and Women across Continents: Biographical and Autobiographical Accounts*, (New York, Berghahn Books, 2016); Hurley, M. “The Genderman: (Re)negotiating Militarized Masculinities when ‘Doing Gender’ at NATO, *Critical Military Studies* [Advance Copy Available Online] (2016)

‘examining each issue from the point of view of men and women to identify any differences in their needs and priorities, as well as in their abilities or potential to promote peace and reconstruction’¹². The watermelon story is presented in a booklet entitled *‘How can Gender Make a Difference to Security in Operations – Indicators’* published by NATO in 2011¹³. This booklet provides a range of case studies in which the gender perspective was deemed to be used ‘successfully’ and to illustrate the Women, Peace and Security agenda ‘in action’; both this story and one regarding the preparation for a wedding were also (re)told to me during the interviews. This article therefore provides an analysis and reflection on one of the NCGP’s early attempts to formalise an understanding of a gender perspective, to generate an understanding of good practice and produce replicable indicators in response to ‘new gender norms’ as represented by UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security agenda. It is important to note that NATO’s engagement with the Women, Peace and Security agenda has developed in significant ways since this document was produced and the interviews conducted. For example, the booklet *‘Whose Security? Practical Examples of Gender Perspectives in Military Operations’*¹⁴ published by the Swedish Armed Forces and the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations, is now used by NATO and offers more nuanced case studies than those offered within the 2011 *‘Indicators’* booklet.

The contributions of this article are therefore two-fold. Firstly, the article offers a *cautionary tale*; of how even well-intentioned attempts to develop new gender policies and practices – especially in the early years of an organisations attempts to develop an understanding of gender issues - can (re)produce essentialised and reductive understandings of complex gender relations. Secondly, it demonstrates how gender mainstreaming initiatives - in whatever guise - are always political and always contextualised by wider institutional norms, policies and practices. NATO’s engagement with the Women, Peace and Security agenda, was contextualised and informed by the alliance’s presence in Afghanistan. Indeed, the war in Afghanistan provides the broader context within which the stories analysed in this article are situated. Feminist research has demonstrated how women’s rights (and gender more broadly) were co-opted in pursuit of the ‘War on Terror’ and the invasion of Afghanistan in particular¹⁵. Cynthia Cockburn has declared NATO’s engagement with UNSCR 1325 an ‘enraging example of how good feminist work can be manipulated by a patriarchal and militarist institution’¹⁶. This article therefore demonstrates the case for a continued, critical

¹² NATO, *Bi-SC Directive 40-1*, op. cit., appendix 1

¹³ NATO, *“How can Gender Make a Difference to Security in Operations – Indicators”* (2011), available: http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_topics/20120308_1869-11_Gender_Brochure.pdf (Accessed June 2014)

¹⁴ Swedish Armed Forces & Nordic Centre for Gender, *“Whose Security? Practical Examples of Gender Perspectives in Military Operations”* (Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations, 2015)

¹⁵ See for example: Ayotte, K and Husain, M.E. ‘Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence and the Rhetoric of the Veil’ *Feminist Formations* Volume 17 No. 3 (2005) pp. 112-133; Cooke, M. ‘Gender and September 11: A Roundtable: Saving Brown Women’, *Signs* Vol. 28 Issue 1 (2002) pp. 431-479; Hunt, K and Rygiel, K (eds) *(En)gendering the War on Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Von der Lippe, B., and Väyrynen, T. ‘Co-opting feminist voices for the war on terror: Laura Bush meets Nordic feminism’ *European Journal of Women’s Studies* Volume 18, No. 1 (2011) pp. 19-33; Young, I. M. ‘The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State’, *Signs* Vol. 29 Issue 1 (2003) pp. 1-25; Wibben, A. T. R. Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan: Exploring the ‘War on Terror’ Narrative in Wibben, A. T. R (ed) *Researching War: Feminist Methods, Ethics and Politics*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) pp. 57-75

¹⁶ Cockburn, C. ‘Snagged on the Contradiction: NATO, UNSC Resolution 1325 and Feminist Responses’, Contribution to the Working Group on ‘Feminist Critiques of Militarization’ No to War – No to NATO Annual Meeting, Dublin 15-17 April 2011

feminist understanding of how gender initiatives manifest within military organisations, how they are used and how they develop over time.

The article is set out as follows: after discussion of methodology and use and importance of narrative research, the article analyses the (re)telling of the Watermelon and wedding stories in turn. Beginning by highlighting the lack of detailed gender analysis within the official accounts, it goes on to show how the stories are used to communicate a wider notion of success and progress, one that is less concerned with the detail of the actual events, but that help to develop a string of signifiers¹⁷ around ‘gender’, ‘women’ and ‘security’ which are familiar and relatable to their intended audience and importantly open to a degree of interpretation. The article details how the Women, Peace and Security agenda – through these stories - becomes coupled to pre-existing NATO goals such as operational effectiveness and force multiplication and in doing so (re)produces essentialised ‘female’ and ‘male’ skills and perspectives. I argue that the use of these stories – framed by a wider uncritical, positive and progressive institutional discourse – call into being particular notions of militarised femininity (embodied by the female soldiers deployed to Afghanistan) and then codifies these into replicable behaviours for other soldiers and wider ‘indicators of success’ for NATO more broadly. Therefore, this article details one way in which NATO’s ‘gender perspective’ frames and positions the female body and (re)constructs a militarised femininity that reinforces (rather than challenges) orthodox gendered dichotomies, leaving gendered interactions between men unacknowledged and therefore unexamined, whilst simultaneously being used by NATO to promote a ‘progressive’ agenda that advances the role of women in NATO missions.

The Importance of Institutional Narratives and Story Telling

Six interviews (four women, two men) were conducted as part of my doctoral research into NATO’s engagement with UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security agenda¹⁸. Participants were recruited using a mixed method of limited snowballing and by direct contact with participants through publicly available email addresses. Each semi-structured interview lasted between sixty to ninety minutes and was audio recorded. Three interviews were conducted at NATO HQ which is based in Brussels, Belgium and one at a mutually convenient location with the United Kingdom. Two interviews were conducted via Skype due to the impracticability of visiting the country and region in which two participants were deployed. I also attended the 2012 and 2013 NCGP Annual Meeting. All names have been changed and I do not provide any specific biographical or occupational information for the interviewees in to provide anonymity. I understand this has an impact on the analysis generated however, offering anonymity allowed participants to speak freely about their experiences. Whilst military elites can be seen as less ‘vulnerable’ than other marginalised or disadvantaged groups, protecting participants anonymity is still an important consideration when researching elite groups. However, even with these omissions, due to the small number of participants, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Each participant was therefore made aware of this condition and asked to sign a consent form, as well as being informed verbally at the beginning of each interview. Those interviewed are not considered to be representatives of the wider views of military personnel within NATO, indeed it was not the intention of the research to produce such generalisable data; these are their individual

¹⁷ Deetz, S. *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonisation*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992)

¹⁸ Hurley, M. “*Gendering NATO: Analysing the Construction and Implementation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s Gender Perspective*”. (PhD diss., Oxford Brookes University, 2014)

perspectives on what is complex, and at the time the interviews were conducted, relatively novel work within the alliance¹⁹. Throughout the interviews certain stories were (re)told; these stories helped the participants communicate various aspects of their work as well articulate the importance of developing a gender perspective within NATO. These stories also contributed to and were informed by a broader narrative of the Women, Peace and Security agenda at NATO.

Narratives and stories provide a valuable resource for research across a wide range of academic disciplines²⁰. Increasingly within feminist theory and feminist international relations and security studies specifically, a critical understanding of the power of stories and narrative has gained increasing prominence²¹. It is important to differentiate between narratives and stories. In many respects they share the same characteristics and are often used interchangeably²², however, there are important distinctions. Within this article I use Feldman, Skoldberg, Brown and Horner's distinction between narrative and story²³. In analysing 'change narratives' within organisations Feldman et al. argue that stories are particular subsets of more 'encompassing narratives'; understanding the encompassing narrative to be "the grand conception that entertains several themes over a period of time". Stories then are "instantiations, particular exemplars, of the grand conception"²⁴. Within this article the stories that are analysed – both the institutional accounts and their (re)telling by individuals – are exemplars of NATO's Women, Peace and Security narrative. The stories of success are situated within and reinforce a wider narrative of *positive progression* and inevitable harmony between the Women, Peace and Security agenda and NATO 'values' constructed by the alliance; a narrative that is premised on NATO's understanding of itself as a key, *responsible* international actor²⁵.

The importance of constructing an encompassing 'gender narrative' in order to advance institutional change has been highlighted within studies of gender mainstreaming initiatives across a range of organisations and institutional contexts. For example, Ely & Meyerson state that 'gender' can get lost or subsumed by pre-existing organisational priorities²⁶. In this regard, 'palatable' gender narratives are needed to communicate the relevancy and/or importance of gender to an (often sceptical) organisational audience. Acceptable narratives – of what UNSCR 1325 is, and is for - are therefore important, and necessary, to afford gender

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Milliken, J., *The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods*. *European journal of international relations*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (1999), pp.225-254; Moen, T. (2006) "Reflections on the Narrative Research Approach." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* Vol. 5 No. 4 (2006) pp. 56-69; Feldman, M.S., Sköldberg, K., Brown, R.N. and Horner, D. Making sense of stories: A rhetorical approach to narrative analysis. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Vol. 14 No. 2 (2004), pp.147-170.

²¹ Hemmings, C. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, (Duke University Press, 2011); Wibben, A. *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); Sylvester, C. *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013); Jeffords, S. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1989); Cooke, M. & A. Wollacott (eds.) *Gendering War Talk*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993)

²² Feldman et. al., op. cit. p. 149.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Hurley, M. "Gender Mainstreaming and Integration in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation" in C. Duncanson & R. Woodward (ed.) *The Palgrave Handbook on Gender and the Military*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

²⁶ Ely, R. & D. Meyerson, "Advancing Gender Equality in Organisations: The Challenge and Importance of Maintaining a Gender Narrative" *Organisation* Vol. 7 pp. 589-609

mainstreaming initiatives authority and/or legitimacy when in competition with pre-existing organisational priorities. According to Hearn, this 'dual agenda' produces inherent paradoxes within gender mainstreaming initiatives²⁷. The pursuit of acceptable gender language and policies requires a level of accommodation and compromise with the language and practices of the 'mainstream'. Gender is therefore often framed as an 'organisational' issue, enacted in systematic, instrumental and measurable ways (as is evidenced in the stories below). According to Hearn, the conceptualisation of gender as an organisational issue evokes tendencies towards de-gendering and neutralising²⁸.

Specific stories facilitate the construction of those broader narratives, helping the organisation to promote the 'relevancy' of new gender initiatives and overcome resistance. The (re)telling of stories is a particularly efficient way of doing this as stories are a 'common, habitual method people use to communicate their ideas'²⁹. We all tell stories, about our lives (both personal and professional), that encompass our experiences, our thoughts and our feelings. As Moen identifies:

"For most people, storytelling is a natural way of recounting experience, a practical solution to a fundamental problem in life, creating reasonable order out of experience. Not only are we continually producing narratives to order and structure our life experiences, we are also constantly being bombarded with narratives from the social world we live in. We create narrative descriptions about our experiences for ourselves and others and we also develop narratives to make sense of the behaviour of others"³⁰

In short, stories help us to make sense of and communicate our experiences of the social world. As Annick Wibben argues: 'narratives are essential because they are the primary way by which we make sense of the world around us, produce meaning, articulate intentions and legitimise action'³¹. For research purposes stories are also particularly rich sources of data: 'Through telling their stories, people distil and reflect a particular understanding of social and political relations'³². Analysing stories helps to provide an understanding of the context within which they are formed. The individual (re)telling a story "is irreducibly connected to her or his social, cultural and institutional setting. Narratives, therefore, capture both the individual and the context"³³. The ways in which stories are (re)told will include and exclude, emphasise and silence in particular ways, and in doing so 'the storyteller not only illustrates his or her version of the action but also provides an interpretation or evaluative commentary on the subject'³⁴. This interrelationship and co-construction between individual and context as captured in and mediated through storytelling is important when looking at how NATO is engaging with and interpreting the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the ways in which individuals tasked with enacting that agenda understand and make sense of what they are doing. Specific stories and their wider narratives also provide a mechanism through which the Women, Peace and Security agenda is *normalised* at NATO.

²⁷ Hearn, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Benschop, Y. & M. Verloo "Sisyphus' Sisters: Can Mainstreaming Escape the Genderedness of Organisations?" *Journal of Gender Studies* Vol. 15 No. 1 (2006) p. 21

²⁹ Feldman et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 148

³⁰ Moen, *op. cit.*, p. 56

³¹ Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies*, *op. cit.*, p.2

³² Feldman et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 148

³³ Moen, *op. cit.*, p. 60

³⁴ Feldman et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 148

Gender Norms, Normalisation and Stories as ‘Currency’

It can be argued that the Women, Peace and Security agenda has increasing ‘currency’³⁵ within the international system and its usage - premised upon a multi-level adoption of UNSCR 1325 - has proliferated. Jacqui True argues that there is an assumption, generally (and within constructivist IR, specifically) that these ‘international norms are ‘good things’; they are what bring states together to cooperate’³⁶, that they spread ‘cooperative, liberal values throughout the international system, thereby socialising its actors into ‘better’ behaviour; she identifies ‘gender’ norms as those that are thought to lead to this better behaviour’³⁷. From a constructivist point of view these international norms become entrenched overtime, forming ‘structures which shape interactions among states and non-state actors’³⁸. In this sense, international gender norms – such as the Women, Peace and Security agenda - diffused internationally and accepted as legitimate practice for states and international organisations, such as NATO, form a system of ‘good gender governance’.

Narrative production is also a site of power³⁹. So, when NATO, a powerful international organisation, engages with and uses the terms ‘1325’ and ‘Women, Peace and Security’ it is drawing upon terms and language that have been pre-produced and disseminated internationally by other powerful international organisational bodies, such as the UN Security Council. Arguably, these institutions provide these terms with particular currency and legitimacy and thus allow them to ‘travel’. Yet, through its own processes of normalisation and integration, NATO is also imbuing these terms with its own particular meaning and produces a narrative around the Women, Peace and Security agenda that ‘fits’ with its own organisational priorities and values⁴⁰. Therefore, there is a danger of ‘fixing’ the term gender, simplifying its meaning through the development of gender policies that simply accommodate the pre-existing agenda of the organisation.

The narratives organisations like NATO develop to facilitate an engagement with the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and the specific stories that support them, can be seen as one way in which this normalisation process occurs. As noted above stories provide a familiar mechanism that allows for particular – often complex - information to be both culturally understandable and communicated ‘efficiently’. As Deetz notes:

‘The story develops a string of signifiers that are more real than any people or events that are discussed. Storytelling...makes choices [...] and some stories are more tellable than others. Like the construction of any news, complex events with multiple perspectives are not as tellable as those with clear polar conflicts’⁴¹

Carol Cohn notes the way that stories about preferential treatment of female soldiers within the US military – told to her by aggrieved male officers - circulated like ‘paper currency’ in

³⁵ James Mittleman, "What is critical globalization studies?" *International Studies Perspectives* Vol. 5 No. 3 (2004), pp. 219-230.

³⁶ True, J. ‘Feminist Problems with International Norms: Gender Mainstreaming in Global Governance’ in J. Tickner, & L. Sjoberg, (ed.) *Feminism and International Relations: Conversations about the Past, Present and Future*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 73-88

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies*, *op. cit.*, p. 2

⁴⁰ Hurley, *Gender Mainstreaming and Integration*, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ Deetz, *op. cit.* p. 310

that they ‘passed from hand to hand, without anyone seeing, or even asking to see, the gold that backed it up’⁴². In their repetition therefore, stories become ‘accepted truths’ within organisations:

‘The power of...stories come not from their evidentiary value (even though they are often offered as evidence), but from their ability to condense and symbolise something that people believe and think important. Even granting that some of the stories may be based on events that really happened, they function as myth, constructing foundational meanings and suffusing the discourse’⁴³

In this sense, stories developed around gender mainstreaming initiatives within organisations need to be ‘tellable’. Broader ‘gender narratives’ need to resonate with an intended audience, with the pre-existing priorities of the organisation, and be spoken in a particular way that does not cause disruption. This is problematic, in that ‘accepted truths’ are often not questioned or critically examined and can be accepted at face-value, especially when presented as official examples of ‘good practice’. For True it is the job of critical feminists to ‘trouble old and new norms and uncover their possible biases, exclusion or silencing’⁴⁴. As NATO began to construct ‘tellable’ stories of the use (and utility) of a ‘gender perspective’ there is evidence that particular ‘signifiers’ and reductive, essentialised understandings were prioritised over a nuanced understanding of complex gender relations and lived experiences. It is those stories – and a desire to trouble them – to which I now turn.

Watermelons: The Gender Perspective ‘in Action’

One of the ways in which NATO measured the successful development and use of a gender perspective is by the use of certain case studies and reports gathered from the field. These reports are made publicly available by the alliance in the form of booklets. The production and dissemination of these booklets can be seen as one way in which NATO is communicating the successful use of a gender perspective to both an external audience and internally, to personnel within the organisation. One in particular was actively disseminated to delegates upon arrival at both the 2012 and 2013 NCGP conferences. Entitled ‘*How Can Gender Make a Difference to Security in Operations*’⁴⁵, it represented the recommendations of the 2011 NCGP annual meeting.

The booklet contains five case studies where it was determined that a ‘gender perspective’ had made a positive impact. The booklet concludes with the formation of generic ‘*indicators of success*’ drawn from these examples of ‘good practice’. These include: indicators related to procedures and directives; indicators related to operational impact; indicators related to training and indicators related to human resources⁴⁶. Moser & Moser identify one the challenges of developing indicators on gender concerns as being the need for ‘uniform

⁴² Carol Cohn, ‘How Can She Claim Equal Rights When She Doesn’t Have to Do as Many Push-Ups as I Do?’: The Framing of Men’s Opposition to Women’s Equality in the Military’, *Men and Masculinities* Vol. 3 Issue 2 (2000), p. 146

⁴³ *Ibid*

⁴⁴ True, *op. cit.*, p. 74; see also: Phillips, L. ‘Gender Mainstreaming: The Global Governance of Women?’ *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* Vol. 26 Issue 1 (2005) pp. 651-663; Bedford, K. ‘Governing Intimacy in the World Bank’ in Rai, S. & G. Waylen (eds.) *Global Governance: Feminist Perspectives*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) pp. 84-106; Bedford, K. ‘Economic Governance in the Regulation of Intimacy in Gender and Development: Lessons from the World Bank’s Programming’ in Caglar, G. E. Prugl, S. Zwingel (eds.) *Feminist Strategies in International Governance* (London, Routledge, 2013) pp. 233-248; Rai, S. & G. Waylen (eds.) *Global Governance: Feminist Perspectives*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

⁴⁵ NATO, *How Gender Can Make a Difference*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid*. pp. 47-48

criteria, determined by consensus⁴⁷. This document produced and disseminated within the organisation via the consensus of the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives (and the approval of the Military Committee) can be seen as an example of NATO's attempt to provide a level of measurability to the gender perspective, normalising its use by aligning it with pre-existing methods used to measure success. In this instance, the indicators were both drawn from and illustrated by small stories with which the intended audience could associate.

Some of these stories contained within the document were also re-told to me during the interviews; demonstrating how certain stories and particular narratives of success were 'travelling' within and through the structures of the alliance via repetition and various (re)interpretations. In particular, the 'watermelon story' (as it was called by one of my participants), was mentioned to me on several occasions and (re)told in detail by one participant – Celine - in particular.

Below, I present the official account as detailed in the booklet:

United States Female Engagement Teams in Sangin: Female military personnel serve as successful interlocutors with local men

Specific summary of Intervention

In mid-2010, Sangin district was heavy with insurgent activity and called one of the most dangerous areas of Afghanistan. Working alongside an infantry unit, a US Corporal was one of two members of a FET visiting a village in Sangin that had not yet been patrolled. The Corporal approached a male farmer and they began a lengthy conversation about his crops. The FET established excellent rapport with the male farmer, who was thrilled to be talking with to someone who shared his enthusiasm for his favourite crop: watermelon. The farmer walked the Corporal to his field and gave her two watermelons as a gift. She accepted the gift and as they continued talking, the man revealed that he had information about the Taliban and security threats in the area. The Corporal told the man that she would alert her colleagues and that they would return to speak with him.

Upon returning to the Forward Operating Base (FOB) and sharing information about the situation, the unit Commander, intelligence staff, and others returned to speak with the farmer. The farmer received them and they sat in his field for some time exchanging pleasantries until the farmer revealed that he would not share the information unless the female Marine returned. While FETs are not designed to have a direct intelligence gathering purpose, the Corporal was sent for and asked to participate. She joined the conversation with the farmer who revealed the location of several IED belts laid in the area, as well as key Taliban conspirators in the area. The information was verified as correct.

What difference did it make to incorporate a gender perspective?

Significant information about local security threats was collected as a result of a FET member engaging directly with men. Female personnel can work within stereotypes to exploit gender norms towards achieving a desired end. The FET Commander in

⁴⁷ Moser, C. & A. Moser, Gender Mainstreaming since Beijing: A Review of Success and Limitations in International Institutions, *Gender and Development* Vol. 13 Issue. 2 (2005) p. 18

Sangin perceived that female military personnel changed the dynamic when in dialogue with men⁴⁸.

Upon first reading this case study, my initial question was: *what precisely constitutes the gender perspective in this interaction?* Aside from the female soldier engaging with a male civilian farmer it was unclear as to how a 'gender perspective' specifically contributed to the success of the mission, or indeed, how the gender perspective was being viewed in relation to the official definition provided in Bi-SC 40-1⁴⁹. It would seem from reading the 'specific summary of intervention' that the development of rapport over a common interest and receipt of gifts was the most important factor that led to intelligence gathering. The gendered dimensions of this interaction are largely left unexamined or assumed by the official account which draws simply on the role and positionality of the female soldier.

There has been considerable feminist research on the role and impact of female peacekeepers in a variety of contexts and how counterinsurgency policy making and practice is inherently gendered⁵⁰. Some of these studies support the idea that female peacekeepers are understood to be more approachable than their male colleagues⁵¹. As Valenius states, according to these studies female peacekeepers can approach local women better than their male colleagues and in some cases the male population perceive the female peacekeepers as more approachable⁵². This case study can be seen to correlate with this understanding, primarily acknowledging the *approachability* of the female soldier. However, I would argue that this is only part of the story, what the official account fails to do is to ask *why*.

Whilst it is made clear that the farmer would only reveal information to the female soldier, an analysis of the gendered interactions taking place is missing. Why was the female soldier able to interact more successfully than her male colleagues? Again, it is made clear that the farmer does not want to divulge information to the male soldiers, but again it is unclear why. These questions are left unanswered. The report concludes from this male/female interaction that: "*Female personnel can work within stereotypes to exploit gender norms towards achieving a desired end*"⁵³. The 'success', from NATO's perspective contained within the case study is obvious – information about the enemy was obtained and force protection increased. But what was it about the interaction between the female soldier and male farmer that led to the conclusion that female personnel can work within stereotypes and exploit gender norms in order to further NATO's goals?

⁴⁸ NATO, *How Gender Can Make a Difference*, op. cit., pp. 28-29

⁴⁹ NATO, *Bi-SC Directive 40-1*, op. cit.

⁵⁰ For example: Dyvik, S. L. "Women as 'Practitioners' and 'Targets' Gender and Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 16 No. 3 (2014), pp. 410-429; Henry, M. "Peaceexploitation? Interrogating Labor Hierarchies and Global Sisterhood among Indian and Uruguayan Female Peacekeepers", *Globalizations*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (2012), pp. 15-33; Karim, S., & Beardsley, K. "Explaining Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Peacekeeping Missions: The Role of Female Peacekeepers and Gender Equality in Contributing Countries", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 53 No. 1 (2016), pp. 100-115; Khalili, L. "Gendered Practices of Counterinsurgency", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37 No. 4 (2011) pp. 1471-1491; Pruitt, L. J. *The Women in Blue Helmets: Gender, Policing, and the UN's First All-Female Peacekeeping Unit*. (California, University of California Press, 2016)

⁵¹ For example see: Olsson, L. Skjelsbaek, I. Barth, E. Hostens, K. (eds) *Gender Aspects of Conflict Interventions: Intended and Unintended Consequences*, Final Report to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, PIRO, 2004); Olsson, L. and Tryggstad, T. (eds) *Women and International Peacekeeping*, (London, Frank Cass, 2001)

⁵² Valenius, J. "A Few Kind Women: Gender Essentialism and Nordic Peacekeeping Operations", *International Peacekeeping* Vol. 14 No. 4 (2007) pp. 510-523

⁵³ NATO, *How Gender Can Make a Difference*, op. cit., paragraph 4

The key question that should be posed is: how was this conclusion reached and what precisely does it mean? The specific summary of the case study does not make it clear what stereotypes the FET member was working within and what gender norms she was exploiting in order to gain information from the farmer, other than being a woman developing a rapport with a man. From an institutional perspective, the story is clear and concise. Success (in the form of information gathering and force protection) is measurable in a way that facilitates a common understanding and the possibility of replication⁵⁴. However, the lack of detail speaks volumes; gendered norms and female stereotypes are *assumed*. In spite of the clarity of ‘success’, the story is open to interpretation. The reader is left to draw upon their own assumptions in order to define what is meant by the exploitation of gender norms and what female stereotypes are. Success of the ‘gender perspective’ in military terms is definite; the *gendered nature* of the interaction is left to individual interpretations and (re)telling, but are premised upon assumed (essentialised) understandings of femininity and masculinity, as Celine’s account below demonstrates.

I present Celine’s account of the ‘watermelon story’ in full, along with my questioning. I do this to provide the full context of what was said and in order to draw out a fuller comparison with the official account provided above. Celine identified this as a ‘*fine, fine*’ story:

MH: So in terms of that example, having that gender perspective, does that help with intelligence gathering?

Celine: Oh yes. Its intelligence gathering, it is even force protection. There is another fine, fine story of a female engagement team, a US female engagement team. So, I don’t know if you know how they work?

MH: I have heard of them (pauses)

Celine: So you have regular patrol, and sometimes they take a female, corporal, sergeant, officer with them to talk to local women. It is not a structured patrol, it is occasionally and randomly. So one of these female corporals went with these patrols and she saw a farmer on the field and he was growing watermelons and she went up to him and said...oh, watermelons, I love watermelons, they are so huge and they are so big, I have watermelons in my home country. You know, the farmer, his ego was stroked, he felt important for this female. So the patrol went and sometime later, that farmer went to the patrol leader and said: ‘I have something to say, I have news about exploding devices along the street, IEDs’. [They said] ‘OK so tell us what you know’. [The farmer replied] ‘No, no, no, I want to tell it but this female corporal has to be there’. So as I said she was not part of the regular patrol, so they got her to the place where the man was and there he explained that on a certain road, on that place, there were that many IEDs and when the engineers went there to de-mine them it was absolutely correct, the number, the place, the type of IED was absolutely correct.

So, if that female corporal had not discussed stupid watermelons, they would never have known. It’s actually a bit like, growing some kind of relationship, in a kind of way that people get worried for your security. If that farmer hadn’t known this, if he did not connect to this female, he would never have feared for her security, feared for her life.

MH: So, why did he not want to talk to the male soldiers?

⁵⁴ Moser & Moser, *op. cit.*

Celine: Because the male soldiers are not interested in growing watermelons.

The gender norms and stereotypes alluded to in the official document are both more explicit and implicit in Celine's account: the farmer's ego was stroked by a woman who complimented him on the size of his watermelons. Although it does not come across in the quotation reproduced above, it is important to note that Celine altered her tone and manner when she stated that they were 'so huge and so big' alluding to a flirtatious interaction between the farmer and the FET member. This is important as

"Stories are often told in such a way that the listener gets the gist of the story, but when the oral communication is transcribed as written text, the reader has difficulty in deciphering meaning...Thus stories are loaded with embedded, sometimes hidden information. Outside the moment of telling, it is necessary to find a more in-depth means of grasping the meaning"⁵⁵

In Celine's account, it was not just the rapport that was key, it was that the man was made to feel important in a specific, gendered and sexualised way by the FET member; in short, she flattered him. The development of a rapport between the two, based upon this interaction, had - in Celine's view - the consequence of the farmer becoming concerned for the FET member's safety. The farmer began to fear for her safety, in a way that he did not with the male soldiers. This highlights an interesting portrayal and understanding of power within the story. The female was perceived to be vulnerable despite her being a fully armed American soldier, in a way that her male colleagues were not. One of the 'gender norms' (alluded to in the official account) here is the desire of the Afghan farmer to 'protect' the female soldier - in Celine's (re)telling, it was the FET member's perceived vulnerability coupled with the sexualised nature of the interaction, that was exploited in order to obtain information about IEDs and the enemy.

Paying attention to both the gendered and sexualised nature of interaction is important. It raises significant questions about how the gender perspective - and in this regard the female soldier - is understood. Is the implication that information is returned simply in exchange for flattery from a woman? Is it the role of the FET member to strategically deploy her femininity in this way in order to 'stroke the farmer's ego'? Would this be an expectation in other encounters? Ultimately, if this is presented as a 'success' story, producing indicators and an example for other female soldiers to replicate, what does it say about the perception of the role of female soldiers in NATO forces more generally? Is the successful use of a gender perspective, merely premised upon a reductive understanding of sex and heterosexuality?

In addition to the unanswered questions identified above, the interaction between the men in the story is also absent from the official account. When I asked Celine why the farmer did not want to talk to the male soldiers, she relates it back to the initial interaction, to rapport. The male soldiers in Celine's understanding were not interested in watermelons, were not interested in the farmer and therefore failed to establish rapport. An analysis of this particular interaction would suggest a more complex answer. It may be true that the male soldiers failed to establish rapport; however, the farmer is also attempting to exert control of the situation vis-à-vis the male soldiers in regard to the release of the information. The farmer is dictating the terms upon which the information is released. In his refusal to divulge the information to the male soldiers, the farmer controls the situation despite the power asymmetries between the men. The female soldier therefore becomes objectified in this exchange between men, a token to be presented to the Afghan farmer, by the male soldiers in exchange for information.

⁵⁵ Feldman et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 150

This level of analysis is missing from both Celine's (re)telling and the official account. The 'positive' focus of the story rests on essentialised and sexualised assumptions of the role of the FET member in the solicitation of information from the farmer. The interaction between the men is not analysed, the 'failure' of the male soldiers to gain this information is not addressed – thus presenting an understanding that the gender perspective, in an operational context, is primarily about women and women's contributions. This runs counter to the official definition of the gender perspective provided by NATO⁵⁶.

The agency of the female soldier as it is presented in both the official account and Celine's interpretation becomes essentialised (and sexualised). She is perceived as being vulnerable, is able to interact with the male farmer in a way that emphasises a specific understanding of her femininity in order to develop a rapport in a way that the male soldiers could not. In this respect, her femininity is strategically deployed in order to illicit information. A discussion about crops therefore becomes a gendered interaction intersecting with (perceived) disparities of power, militarism, ethnicity and heterosexuality; all operating within a specific cultural context of rural Afghanistan. Yet this complexity is stripped away, particularly in the official account, condensing and symbolising something that NATO deems to be important and producing particular signifiers rather than acknowledging the nuanced and multidirectional interactions that took place⁵⁷.

Using this example as a case study of success uncritically, NATO - and by extension Celine - implicitly reproduces traditional gendered stereotypes. Even if it does not explicitly define these stereotypes, the assumed (or perceived) vulnerability and need for (masculinist) protection is manipulated by NATO to produce a replicable indicator of success⁵⁸. I would argue that in defining this as a successful example of the gender perspective, the agency of the female soldier is bounded and limited in particular ways. Orthodox gender norms and (hetero)sexuality provide context within which this 'successful' encounter takes place and provide the framework for the story. Rather than challenge these (limited) interpretations NATO is accepting and encouraging them in order to further alliance goals of operational effectiveness. However, it could also be argued that the female soldier is expressing power and agency through consciously deploying her femininity to manipulate a situation and gather information in this particular way. Without the first-hand account of the FET member it is important not to assume a lack of awareness of these gendered and sexualised boundaries on her behalf. Indeed, we know little about the FET member - her ethnicity, for example - other than her sex and rank. It could quite legitimately be argued that the male farmer is being manipulated by the FET member. However, again, this level of detail and a broader, critical analysis of the encounter is missing.

The Wedding

In addition to the watermelon story, the perception of female soldiers as successful 'intelligence gatherers' was a recurrent theme throughout the interviews. One of the perceived successes of having a 'gender perspective' was that it manifested in being able to speak to civilian women - often described as the 'silent fifty percent' of the population - as well as men. One of my participants, Grace, drew upon the role of the FETs in this regard when I asked her what a successful gender perspective looked like:

⁵⁶ NATO, Bi-SC Directive 40-1, *op. cit.*, appendix 1.

⁵⁷ Cohn, *op. cit.*, p. 146

⁵⁸ Hurley, *The Gendeman*, *op. cit.*

Grace: I've noticed that these female engagement teams that the American's use, we've got statistical data to prove this, the men would go up and talk to them and tell them things, sometimes it was just idle chit-chat, like 'there is going to be a wedding here this weekend, so if you hear any celebratory fire don't worry'

MH: Sorry, do you mean that the Afghan men would go up to the female soldiers?

Grace: Yeah, and so I think that the intelligence corp. have realised that there is this difference between men and women and that women in some sort of espionage or intelligence role, might have more to gain. And in a way, in Afghanistan they can talk to men and women

Again, like in the accounts above, Grace asserts the 'information gathering' role that female soldiers are seen to bring to NATO missions. Through these stories the FET comes to signify distinctly female competencies and skills; competencies that are different from, yet complementary to, their male colleagues. The example of the wedding that Grace draws upon was also used by Celine, but in a more elaborate way:

It was a Swedish gender advisor working in a PRT in ISAF, and she tasked the patrol leader to talk to women. It was a bit difficult but in the end the patrol succeeded in talking to women and started a conversation sometimes, but it's not so easy and took some time. One of the questions they asked were: what are you looking forward to? What is going to happen in your life in the coming days and weeks? And the women said that they were looking forward to a big, big wedding. So there was a big wedding and they expected like six hundred guests. Now these six hundred guests if they had come from different villages around, it's like a mass of people moving on the roads and blocking the roads, making the fact the military convoys couldn't pass any more, and had difficulties to pass. Also when there is a big party like that they fire in the air and if the patrol leader did not mention that to his commander, it would have been like, 'what's happening'? All those people on the streets, is there a riot coming up? And then when you hear the shooting, this could become a security incident

Interestingly there is a discrepancy in Grace and Celine's telling of this story. In Grace's account, it was female soldiers who approached civilian men, for Celine it was male soldiers (instructed by a female gender advisor) who gained the information from civilian women. I asked Celine to clarify whether it was male or female soldiers who gathered the information, she replied:

It was a male patrol talking to local women, but when you as a patrol leader talk to the elder of the city or village or talk to other men, they will never mention a wedding. A wedding for men is not important, but for women it is important. But for security it is also important to know that something is going to happen and that it is only just a wedding

At one level, this could be read as Grace and Celine offering slight variations of the same story. One of the strengths of narrative research according to Moen is that it allows for this type of 'multivoicedness' to be explored⁵⁹. There is no single, static account of a particular story (despite what is presented in the documents); stories and their broader narratives are always under construction and are reconstructed depending on context, audience, new

⁵⁹ Moen, *op. cit.*, p. 60

knowledge and new encounters⁶⁰. Here, whilst the discrepancy may seem minor – whether the female soldier elicited the information directly from the civilian men or whether the male soldiers approached civilian women on the advice of a female gender advisor – the way in which the female soldier is positioned in their respective (re)telling is symptomatic of how Celine and Grace viewed both the role of women and men within the armed forces more generally and was expressed throughout their interviews. Throughout her interview Celine described distinctly male and female ‘perspectives’ of security. The male perspective was one that traditionally failed to pay attention to the role, place and concern of women. In her wedding story, these men need specific instruction, to be informed by a ‘female perspective’ to facilitate a successful information exchange. Also for Celine, a wedding remained a woman’s concern and unimportant for men in much the same way that they were simply not interested in growing watermelon. Celine’s accounts of both the watermelon and wedding story therefore reinforce a heteronormative gendered dichotomy of interests and perspectives that were replicated to varying degrees in the official accounts. Grace’s account builds upon a more general view she expressed during her interview whereby female soldiers were *used* in very particular ways by their respective national militaries. Interestingly, she tells of the civilian men actively approaching the female soldiers, again signifying a more accessible quality of the FET members. In Grace’s account, it is not the female perspective *per se* that is successful but the *physical presence* of the female soldiers in attracting the attention of the civilian men. In a similar way to the watermelon story above, for Grace, a ‘successful gender perspective’ is read and facilitated through the presence of a female body. Yet, again, in both accounts the role of the men in the stories is left unexamined, furthering the reinforcement of gender with women.

What the above examples demonstrate is by understanding the gender perspective in such a way, NATO limits or bounds the parameters within which the female and male soldiers can operate. Skills, values, competencies are attached to and defined by sex, not as qualities in and of themselves. In addition, the gender perspective comes to signify either simply the presence of the female body or conflated with a reductive notion of a ‘female perspective’ that leaves men and masculinity unexamined. The context and complexity of the original encounters almost becomes redundant as highly specific and variable case studies are filtered and reduced to replicable behaviours and specific skills. Those behaviours and skills embodied by the female soldier are seen as strategically desirable. Within these stories the female body becomes ‘thing’, a commodity to be deployed accordingly⁶¹. In this sense, a level of objectification is taking place. NATO can be seen to be using perceptions of heteronormative femininity, of the female soldier, as a resource. Moser and Clark argue that that essentialising the genders through the equation of women/peace, men/war (which can be extended here to women as essentialised, information gatherers, men as unreconstructed war fighters) ‘treats men and women as ‘objects’⁶² and Sjoberg & Gentry suggest that when people, are objectified, ‘agency is removed’⁶³.

As these stories are reduced further and codified into indicators for others to replicate this raises the issues of choice and consent. If these ways of understanding and deploying the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Cornwall, A. & Lindisfarne, N. (ed.) *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*, (London, Routledge, 1994) p. 36

⁶² Moser, C. & Clark, F.C. (eds.) *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, (London, Zed Books, 2001) p. 5

⁶³ Sjoberg, L. & C. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, (London, Zed Books, 2007) p. 198

gender perspective become proscriptive as a set of indicators to be adopted, what impact does that have upon the individual agency of female soldiers? Sjoberg and Gentry identify that ‘women are often assigned obligations that they have not agreed to, implicitly or explicitly’⁶⁴; does the deployment of this particular understanding of ‘femininity’ as presented in these accounts become an *obligation* for all female soldiers irrespective of the consent or choice of the individual woman? Hirschmann states that the intention of ‘gendered lenses’ is to see the incompleteness of choice because they recognise gender bias in the structure of political obligation and social agency⁶⁵. However, the above accounts demonstrate the incompleteness of NATO’s official gender analysis. The official ‘gendered lenses’ that have interpreted these success stories reproduce essentialised notions of female agency and rather than recognise gender bias – or the complexity of gender relations - serve to reinforce it.

Conclusion: A Cautionary Tale

NATO’s gender perspective is not developing in a vacuum. As has been detailed above, its construction has been part of an engagement with UNSCR 1325 and NATO’s interpretation of the resolution’s requirements. The gender perspective has also been developed within, and been conditioned by, NATO’s own institutional norms; ways of speaking and expressing ideas form part of these norms. The broader Women, Peace and Security narrative at NATO is one of *positive progression*. It is noticeable in both NATO’s official documentation and as a feature of the interviews I conducted, that *failure* and *violence* enacted by women (both military and civilian) were not readily acknowledged. Those interviewed often articulated the ‘challenges’ of the process, but never explicit failures – even these challenges were presented as obstacles that could be overcome with hard work and determination. ‘Good practice’ was championed, documented and shared via the NCGP meetings; ‘bad practice’ was not. This ‘silence of failure’, like the (re)telling of the stories above, can be seen as a product of the powerful speech norms that pervade organisations such as NATO. Female soldiers are trained, like their male colleagues to use deadly force, to deploy (state or alliance-sanctioned) violence to achieve desired aims. Yet in the accounts offered to me, female soldiers were framed as information gatherers and (relatively benign) interlocutors between the military and local population – what Valenius describes as a ‘few kind women’⁶⁶. That violence enacted by female soldiers or the failure of the gender perspective to contribute *positively* to alliance success, was unspoken during the interviews furthered a conceptualisation of women’s skills and competencies as ‘soft’, peaceable and complementary to those of their male colleagues, a sentiment expressed readily by participants. These discursive silences help to contextualise the watermelon and wedding stories and position female soldiers as *peacekeepers*⁶⁷.

The supporting documentation produced by NATO concerning UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security agenda portray, almost exclusively, these positive (non-violent) contributions of women to both the establishment of the gender perspective and alliance success more generally. This discourse is often reinforced and illustrated by pictures of smiling female soldiers holding children and integrating peacefully with the civilian population. Indeed, NATO’s official ‘1325 logo’ - used in NATO’s social media and

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p.191

⁶⁵ Hirschmann, N. “Freedom, Recognition and Obligation: A Feminist Approach to Political Theory”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 83 No. 4 (1989), pp. 1228-9

⁶⁶ Valenius, op. cit.; See also: McBride K. and Wibben, A.T.R. The Gendering of Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, *Humanity* Volume 3 No. 2 (2012) pp. 199-215

⁶⁷ Charlesworth, H. ‘Are Women Peaceful? Reflections on the role of Women in Peace-Building’, *Feminist Legal Studies* Vol. 16 Issue 3 (2008) pp. 347-361

increasingly on official documentation - portrays the silhouette of a young woman, arms outstretched, reaching skyward⁶⁸.

In one respect this is not surprising. NATO, like many organisations, promotes a (sanitised) image of itself for public consumption. Likewise, the institutional framing of 'gender issues' - and military women more generally - in a positive, progressive way is not unique to NATO. Gibbings identified similar norms operating within the context of the UN, particularly in relation to UNSCR 1325⁶⁹. She asserts that UN language is based around utopian visions generating hope of radical change and that UNSCR 1325 is situated (and saturated) in an institutional discourse that places the contribution of women to peace making as inherently positive. She argues that the Women, Peace and Security agenda within the UN is shaped by the pre-existing practices and expectations within the Security Council whereby positive and uplifting speech is valued. These master narratives (of positive progression) become naturalised thorough a process of repetition and interpretation. Anyone who challenges these institutional ways of speaking is either silenced or marginalised⁷⁰. Speaking at the NCGP 2013 Annual Meeting, Sir Richard Shirreff (Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe) described NATO as a 'values-based organisation' and situated the work of the Committee in the shared-values of NATO members. NATO discourse, whilst not distinctly 'utopian' in the UN sense, is nevertheless framed by notions of collective defence (rather than offensive aggression), security for its members, democratic ideals and the rule of law. Violence and failure do not feature prominently in NATO's account of itself, both internally and externally, despite the organisation being involved in active combat operations in which NATO soldiers enact and are subject to extreme violence. In the Women, Peace and Security narrative, peace building and security provision are therefore promoted over violence and war fighting in NATO's representation of itself and its activities. These powerful speech norms (and silences) provide the context within which the gender perspective is produced and stories of success are (re)told.

This article has shown how the use of stories was important in the initial construction and institutionalisation of NATO's gender perspective. The article has highlighted the tensions that emerge between the individual level - of the 'success' of one FET member - and the structural use of these stories about individual female soldiers as a 'gender story'. These stories help to make the adoption and integration of UNSCR 1325 and a gender perspective at NATO 'tellable' in three distinct, yet interrelated ways: Firstly, and most importantly, the gender perspective is embodied by and enacted primarily through the presence of female soldiers. The gendered interactions by men and between men are neglected or left unexamined. It is the experience of female soldiers that are centralised. Indeed, all of the additional stories in the 'Indicators' document centralise the role of women⁷¹. In one respect, this is what UNSCR 1325 calls for, increased participation of women and an acknowledgement of women's needs and concerns at all levels. However, as the above accounts highlight, the conflation of the 'gender perspective' with a generic, ill-defined and essentialised 'female perspective', or the mere presence of a female body, is extremely problematic. Secondly, the gender perspective is premised on a particular, essentialised

⁶⁸ NATO, 'Review of the Practical Implications of UNSCR 1325 for the Conduct of NATO-led Operations and Missions – Executive Summary' (2013)

http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2013_10/20131021_131023-UNSCR1325_Practical_Implications_EN.pdf (Accessed June 2017)

⁶⁹ Gibbings, S. "No Angry Women at the UN: Political Dreams and Cultural Politics of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325", *International Feminist Journal of Politics* Vol. 13 Issue 4 (2011) pp. 522-538

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 532

⁷¹ NATO, *How Gender Can Make a Difference*, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-34

construction of heteronormative femininity that is strategically deployed to manipulate and exploit, rather than challenge existing gender norms. The FET member is (hetero)sexual, vulnerable, available, and harmless. Thirdly, the gender perspective as it is presented here, calls for these characteristics, behaviours and associated 'skills' to be codified into replicable indicators that can be institutionalised and operationalised in order to further NATO goals of increasing operational effectiveness, force multiplication and protection.

At one level, perhaps the presence of essentialised, reductive notions of masculinity and femininity within a military context is not that surprising. Sandra Whitworth has argued that the military is one organisation that actually 'gets' gender and is adept at manipulating it to achieve desired ends, whether this be establishing conformity and uniformity in masculinity in basic training methods or in extracting information from enemy combatants⁷². However, the persistence of these essentialised constructions should be cause for concern. If increased participation of women in both an institutional and operational context is premised upon such reductive understandings of gender, the transformative potential of such initiatives is severely circumscribed. The analysis of these stories and narratives offered within this article raise many unanswered – and troubling - questions. Perhaps most concerning, these stories of 'successful' female participation are constructed at the expense of a broader analysis and re-evaluation of the role and place of women and men within the armed forces, within NATO, and in the role that they have in peacekeeping and war fighting contexts. This article offers both a cautionary tale and an opportunity to reflect upon – and ultimately learn from - the early stages of what is an ongoing and complex engagement between NATO and the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

⁷² Whitworth, S. "Globalizing Gender: Who Gets It? Who Doesn't" *The Ethics of Building Peace in International Relations, Selected Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Conference of the Centre for International and Security Studies* (2005) pp. 119-130