‘Politics as War’: Women and Leadership into the Future

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Abstract: This chapter explores the presence of war metaphor in contemporary political discourse and its impact on women’s political leadership. It is particularly concerned with the implications of the continuing relationship between politics and war in view of the norm that women are not, or should not be, violent. This norm is identified through a study of public attitudes towards women in war as they have been expressed in online comments posted to news websites. The analysis of these attitudes, together with an examination of the use of war metaphor in contemporary Australian politics, offers new insights into some of the cultural challenges faced by women in leadership roles.

Keywords: women, politics, leadership, war metaphor, gender norms

An important narrative in Australia’s white history concerns women’s struggles for inclusion in traditionally male spheres of public life; struggles that have periodically challenged conservative attitudes towards women and the public/private divide. Describing the social anxiety aroused by the women’s suffrage movement at the turn of the twentieth century, for example, Marian Sawer and Marian Simms identified a ‘perennial theme in conservative resistance to equality for women: the damage that will be done to the moral fabric of the nation, and in particular the family’ (emphasis added). More recently, Katerina Agostino has argued that the increasing number of women entering the defence force has resulted in men perceiving women ‘to be undermining the very fabric of society, to be going against “natural” gender laws which endow each human with an essential sexual and gender identity’ (emphasis added). These authors emphasise the fundamental importance of gender to popular understandings of the social order, having tapped public attitudes towards masculinity and femininity that are so deeply entrenched as to appear not only natural, but also defining and immutable. The parallel between public attitudes towards women in war and women in politics is rarely drawn in scholarly research, however, as at first glance the two domains appear unrelated.

Despite the current popular conception that women have achieved workplace equity, challenges remain for women as leaders that are underwritten by a historic connection between leadership and masculinity.
The increasing number of women in many of the world’s parliaments has not seriously challenged the long history of white male leadership, particularly in Commonwealth nations that have inherited the Westminster system of government. The relationship between masculinity and politics is inherent, for example, in parliamentary architecture such as the oppositional seating design of the chambers, which was ‘deliberately designed for debate and to accommodate conflict’, and encourages a ‘masculine style of politics’. The tradition for government and opposition to be seated ‘two swords and one inch’ across from each other is a physical manifestation of the historic association between politics, masculinity and violence that continues to influence the behaviour of today’s parliamentarians.

The relationship between politics, masculinity and violence is also reflected in the continued use of war metaphor in political discourse. The language of politics and war intertwine so comfortably at least partly because, historically, both have been exclusively male domains. Once again, the adversarial nature of the Westminster system is central to this practice, as the pitting of two opposing parties against one another is conducive to analogies with traditional conceptions of war. The pervasive use of war metaphors is problematic for women in politics, in the light of Veronika Koller and Elena Semino’s conclusion that such metaphors exert a ‘masculinising force’ on discourse and its ‘related social practices’. Again, the increasing number of women in politics and political journalism does not appear to have mitigated the use of war metaphor, nor altered its gendered character. The Australian media, as Marian Simms has noted, still tends to rely on ‘tired old stereotypes about the gendered nature of leadership’. Consequently, there has not been an adequate cultural shift in the way we talk about, and therefore perceive, contemporary politics. So common has the use of war metaphor become that its influence in non-war discourses is often not recognised; as a result, the impact of war metaphor on public attitudes towards women in leadership has been insufficiently examined.

This chapter, then, examines the presence and influence of war metaphors in contemporary political discourse. It is particularly concerned with the implications for women of the continuing relationship between politics and war in view of the norm that women are not, or should not be, violent. Two recent political developments in Australia are compelling case studies for this examination. The first was Julia Gillard’s controversial leadership takeover in June 2010, followed by her party’s narrow victory at an election in August 2010. This event provides an opportunity to consider the extent to which war metaphors continue to pervade political discourse in spite of a woman’s leadership. The second development was the Gillard government’s announcement in September 2011 of the removal, within five years, of all gender-based restrictions to employment in the Australian
Defence Force (ADF). It marked an important moment in public discourse as the idea that women and violence may not be incompatible, inferred in the announcement, sparked widespread discussion about masculinity, femininity and gender roles. One aspect of this discourse, online comments posted to news websites at the time of the announcement, is examined in this chapter. These comments provide a key insight into some of the cultural challenges for women that arise out of gendered discourses.

Guiding this examination is an understanding that the language used in discourse has a significant impact not merely on the way issues are conceived, but how they are constructed, or shaped. Two points on the conception of discourse utilised should be noted before turning to the analysis. First, discourse is more than just speech or text; as Mary Talbot has argued, it is a ‘site of cultural production’. Thus, while it may appear that ways of speaking about women are reflections of women’s circumstances, it is crucial to recognise that as discourse is constructive; the way women are discussed has an impact on women’s lived experience. This is, of course, not limited to discourses concerning women but applies to the way any discursive object is discussed. For the purposes of this chapter it is instructive in the overlapping domains of gender, politics and war. Second, poststructural conceptions of discourse encompass all discursive statements including those at its periphery; not only the mainstream or dominant voices, but also the counter-discourse and marginalised voices. This decentering has been a crucial aspect of feminist and postcolonial research (among other fields), enabling historically marginalised voices such as women’s to be heard and valued. Interestingly, some voices remain marginalised: ‘everyday’ attitudes, for example, are often considered extraneous to politically correct public discourse. In private conversation and social banter the language used to discuss women is often problematic, as suggested in Talbot’s contention that ‘what appear to be natural aspects of the everyday lives of women and men have to be exposed as culturally produced and as disadvantageous to women’.

Accordingly, the attitudes of ‘everyday’ Australians, such as those explored below, are vital research subjects that warrant critical analysis as much as the official discourses of government, for example.

War metaphors are identified in this chapter as vehicles for the expression of gender norms. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson established that metaphors are fundamental cognitive tools that allow humans to make sense of the world. Accordingly, metaphors are ‘not primarily a matter of language but of cognition: people make use of some concepts to understand, talk and reason about others’. Thus, the use of metaphor to interpret politics is not an anomaly – but neither is it unproblematic. Deborah Tannen, for example, argued that an overreliance on war metaphors in the United States has created an ‘argument culture’, which in turn has increased people’s
tendency to view society in terms of ‘fighting, conflict, and war’. The constricting power of metaphors is revealed in the effects of this process, as it ‘limits our imaginations when we consider what we can do about situations we would like to understand or change’.18 Similarly, Michelle C. Bligh et al. revealed the divisiveness of war metaphors in their finding that although women and men often agree on political issues, there is a prevalent tendency ‘to view the sexes as opposing forces, rather than as cooperative groups’.19 Further, Nicholas Howe has suggested that as war metaphors draw primarily on ‘male experiences’ their use in politics may be exclusionary towards women.20 Little research has built on this argument, particularly its implications for women as political citizens: most studies focus on women candidates. Recently, for example, Erika Falk analysed the application of the political ‘gender card’ metaphor to Hillary Clinton, and found that ‘metaphors subtly express latent cultural values that may not be considered proper to explicitly articulate’.21 Thus, the use of metaphors as shorthand for ‘less palatable’ cultural sentiments tends to perpetuate stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards marginalised groups, creating difficulties for members of those minority groups who run for political office.

Questions such as the extent to which metaphor use in politics may shape public conceptions of gender, then, are yet to be answered. Previous research has focused on gender differences in metaphor use; but whether pervasive use of war metaphors impacts upon men and women differently remains under-examined.22 Perhaps most importantly, there has been little exploration into the way gendered attitudes underwrite war metaphors and ultimately enable their divisive and exclusionary power. By drawing on popular understandings of the gendered nature of war, this chapter offers a critical insight into the source of the power of war metaphors. Further, the revelation that these popular gender norms are embedded in the language of politics suggests negative implications for women in political leadership. Thus, this analysis of public attitudes towards women in war may help explain some of the continuing challenges to the public acceptance and expansion of women’s leadership roles. The chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first I establish some of the prevalent attitudes towards women in war through analysis of online posts made by members of the public in 2011. In the second section I identify the presence of war metaphor in recent Australian political discourse. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of attitudes towards women in war for women in political leadership.

Women in war

War has been bonded to masculinity for thousands of years; as noted by Hugh Smith, it would seem that ‘war is a universal phenomenon and the male
warrior is the universal archetype’. This association has contributed to a large-scale perpetuation of gendered violence against men, who ‘clearly bear the brunt of the violence of war as fighters, as targets of violence, as subjects of systems of interrogation and torture’. It has also contributed to a widespread discomfort with the thought of women in war.

The extent to which contemporary social attitudes continue to reflect this discomfort is examined in this section.

Women have always been present in and affected by war despite its perception as a male domain. Historically, women have been war’s prizes and victims; in post-9/11 war, women are upheld as subjects requiring ‘liberation’, and ‘appropriated’ as justification for war. The stereotypes of women as agents of peace and healing, while often based in truth, have nonetheless been used to justify women’s exclusion from powerful roles such as tactician, fighter and leader. They have established powerful women such as Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I and Margaret Thatcher as anomalies rather than serious challenges to the gender order. Modern ‘tough’ women who have emerged in popular culture, such as Lara Croft and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, are socially acceptable precisely because they are fictitious. Sara Butsworth has argued ‘the construction of feminine heroism necessitates that the individual be “not like other girls”’. Further, an audience’s willing suspension of disbelief when confronted with powerful heroines ensures that the violent dominance of these characters does not seriously destabilise the gender status quo.

What does challenge popular social attitudes is the idea of women as perpetrators of violence, even if state-sanctioned or institutionalised. Marita Gronnvoll has demonstrated, for example, that a fascination with Lynndie England as a gender ‘aberration’ was prominent in the media coverage of the 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal, while there was a ‘gender silence’ about the male soldiers involved. Nevertheless, women’s global military presence is escalating; women are conscripted into the Israeli Defence Force and have unrestricted access to military roles in a number of Western democratic nations including Canada, Denmark and New Zealand. In addition, the blurring of the ‘front line’ through remote and virtual warfare, and the conflation of war, peacekeeping and reconstruction duties, means that Australian women have for some time already been involved in combat situations. The broader public, at least in Australia, does not appear fully cognisant of these developments, however, as powerful gender stereotypes continue to uphold the traditional link between violence and masculinity, perpetuating the belief that women do not belong in war.

Renewed public discussion of these beliefs was stimulated by the Australian government’s announcement in September 2011 that all gender-based restrictions to job opportunities in the ADF would be abolished over
five years. Much of the professional commentary responded positively, but some public discomfort was evident, particularly in comments posted in response to the announcement by readers of online news articles. To gauge where contemporary public sentiments towards women in war lie, I selected three online news items, which between them elicited 692 reader responses providing direct, although not flawless, access to individual opinions. Two of these news reports were written by men and adopted negative approaches to the proposed changes (Greg Sheridan, *Australian* and Clive Hamilton, *Age*); the third was a positive approach written by a woman (Tory Shepherd, *The Punch*). After removing duplicate and irrelevant (unrelated to the topic of women in war) comments, 579 remained for analysis. These were then divided into posts contributed by men (commenters claiming to be men or using male names); women (commenters claiming to be women or using female names) and unspecified (those that could not be determined by name or in the text as either men or women). Of course, the veracity of any of these details is impossible to establish, but this proviso is tempered by the power of online anonymity to encourage participation and foster the unrestrained expression of opinion. Indeed, some scholars have argued that online anonymity has been a significant development, enabling marginalised groups generally to participate in public dialogue. It is noteworthy, then, that 36 per cent of the relevant comments fell into the ‘unspecified’ category, while 43 per cent were posted by men and only 21 per cent by women. That half the number of women as men openly admitted their gender when discussing personal opinion online may be explained as women utilising the opportunity for anonymity in greater numbers than men to avoid gender-based scrutiny; however, the data collected for this analysis is inconclusive on this point.

The three categories ‘men’, ‘women’ and ‘unspecified’ were then further separated into ‘positive’ (supporting the announced changes to ADF policy, or expressing a positive attitude towards women); ‘negative’ (objecting to the ADF changes or negative towards women); and ‘neutral’ (on topic, but unable to be identified as for or against the announced change). Combining all gender groups it is revealed that women’s equal access to jobs in combat was supported by approximately 41 per cent of this sample, with 38 per cent disagreeing and 20 per cent uncertain. Breaking this down by gender reveals that the responses of women to all three articles were predominantly supportive, combining to a total of 59 per cent positive. The unspecified comments, too, were primarily positive at 48 per cent across the three articles (again suggesting the possibility of some link between women and gender-anonymous posting). There was more ambiguity in men’s attitudes with a majority of men supporting the ADF changes in response to one article, but overwhelmingly negative in response to another. The total positive responses made by men over the three articles aggregated to 28 per cent. Judith
Halberstam’s argument that the current gender order is ‘sustained by a conservative and protectionist attitude by men in general toward masculinity’ appears supported by this sample: the extent of men’s negative responses (52 per cent) suggests that the proposed expansion of women’s military participation is a threat to some men’s conceptions of masculinity. The discussion of specific negative comments, which follows, adds further weight to this interpretation.

The negative responses generally corresponded to three timeworn arguments against women’s participation in combat, previously identified by Smith. The first relates to women’s physical characteristics: women are not physically as strong as men; they have a lesser spatial and mechanical ability; they fall pregnant, menstruate and have different hygiene requirements. Corresponding objections in my analysis included a comment by ‘Sad Sad Reality’ that ‘the SAS is set at an elite male level and thus far beyond the capabilities of even the fittest most aggressive women. Forget the GI Jane BS. Women just don’t have what it takes.’ ‘George Copley’ remarked that ‘When men get terrible stomach wounds most can be fixed up by first class doctors, but women have all their reproductive organs there’; and ‘Maria Totto’ stated ‘I certainly would not like to find myself in a combat trench during my menstrual [sic] cycle’. Smith describes a second argument against women’s participation in combat roles as belief in a ‘natural’ division of labour, based on the identification of women as nurturers, not ‘killers’. Posts corresponding to this belief included ‘Anne71’, who contended ‘most men have it hard-wired into their psyche to protect the women around them in times of danger. That’s not sexism, that’s pure instinct.’ ‘Creeker’ explained, ‘I was brought up to cherish and defend our women and children not expose them to the horrors of the battlefield’; and ‘James’ argued ‘women generally are viewed as having to expend energy on caring for offspring and bearing a baby for 9 months. So the potential destruction of women in a war is pretty bad because it then becomes harder to reproduce a population.’ These comments reveal that paternalistic beliefs about biology, masculinity and femininity continue to influence the perception that women are less capable than men. Although they seem benign, such ‘protective’ beliefs preclude the consideration of women’s ‘needs, capacities, wishes, and interests’ and therefore have a greater social significance for women than is acknowledged in the public discourse.

A third longstanding objection to women in combat is what Smith identified as a ‘military ethic’: a belief that the presence of women would interfere with male bonding and other processes essential to a frontline operation. Accordingly, ‘Ex Infantry’ stated that ‘placing a few females in sections of an Infantry rifle company will change the psychological dynamics massively and these will be negative on the overall performance of the unit’.
According to ‘Trevor’, ‘the male–female dynamic destroys the chain of command which is essential in combat units’; and ‘Old Digger’ described the brotherly relationships he formed on military duty, being ‘close knit, welded to each other through extended bouts of extreme physical and mental discomfort with the kind of non-sexual love they call mateship, so close we would die for each other, literally … I can’t honestly see how girls are going to fit in’. Substantial evidence was found in this sample to add a fourth popular objection to women’s combat service: antifeminist sentiment. According to ‘Tucky’, for example, ‘really, what we’re seeing here is the lesbian feminists screwing things up again’; while ‘Zac48’ suggested that ‘the best choice of female soldier would be those feminazis who have always got their teeth bared and blood running down their jowls. That should frighten the sh*t out of the enemy’. There were also, as indicated, a variety of positive responses that supported the announced change to ADF policy, such as this comment by ‘Paul’: ‘Would I want my daughter to be a combat soldier? No, but then I wouldn’t really want my son to either. If that was her desire, though, she should have the chance.’ Overall, positive comments were a minority among men. One explanation for this may be that the process of leaving comments tendentially elicits argumentative rather than supportive views. According to Susan C. Herring, when online men are more likely than women to ‘manifest an adversarial orientation towards their interlocutors’. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, the comments may represent a deep level of discomfort with the idea of women in combat.

Public discussions about the presence of women in war are generally dominated by the professional views of journalists, politicians, social commentators and ADF spokespeople. One of the more interesting elements of this discourse is that these mainstream voices appear somewhat disconnected from the discussion at an ‘everyday’ level. The counter-discourse is fascinating for what it reveals of the variety of attitudes towards women that exist in contemporary Australia. Rather than dismissing this element of public opinion as an irrelevant fringe, I contend that such a counter-discourse may influence the broader public discussion about women, and therefore affect women’s lives. Thus, it is critical to interrogate the ways attitudes towards women in war may parallel or reinforce attitudes towards women in politics, particularly in light of the discursive connection between politics and war, to which I now turn.

**Women and war in politics**

In his posthumously published lectures of 1975–76, Michel Foucault quipped that ‘politics is the continuation of war by other means’. He was referring to the famous dictum of Carl von Clausewitz that war is a continuation of
politics by other means; turning it on its head to suggest a more cynical relationship between war and politics.\textsuperscript{49} Although Foucault pointed to this relationship only to explain its limitations for the study of power, the idea of ‘politics as war’ continues to have a profound impact on contemporary thought, demonstrated in part by the pervasiveness of the language of war in Western political discourse.

The examples in Australian political discourse are numerous, and appear limited by neither partisanship nor time. For example, one of the longest running ideological battles between the political left and right, over the legacy of Australia’s colonial past and its impact on Indigenous peoples, has been dubbed the ‘culture wars’.\textsuperscript{50} Controversial politicians with reputations for intentionally making statements to ‘damage’ their opponents have been described in the Australian media as ‘bomb throwers’, and aggressive politicians called ‘attack dogs’.\textsuperscript{51} Following the Liberal Party’s defeat at the 2007 federal election Tony Abbott, now Opposition Leader, set out his political ideologies in a book titled \textit{Battlelines}.\textsuperscript{52} Within the ‘ranks’ of Labor, too, political beliefs are linked to war: delegates describe the party mechanism for agenda setting, the National Labor Conference, as a ‘battle of ideas’.\textsuperscript{53} Under Kevin Rudd’s leadership (2007–2010), a select few senior cabinet ministers were responsible for making many of the party’s decisions; these MPs were dubbed the ‘Gang of Four’ (a reference to a powerful communist faction known by that name during Mao’s Cultural Revolution), and depicted in political cartoons as gun-toting gangsters.\textsuperscript{54}

Some journalists and commentators indulge in war metaphor to a greater extent than others. One of Australia’s senior political reporters, Dennis Shanahan, is renowned for infusing politics with war metaphor. He described ALP politicians in the 2010 campaign as ‘depressed about the prospect of further incendiaries going off on the campaign trail like political roadside bombs, planted ahead of time and detonated by remote control’.\textsuperscript{55} Even in the space of 140 characters on Twitter, Michelle Grattan, another ‘veteran’ of the press gallery remarked of the former prime minister, ‘Kevin Rudd must be in a fine old mood in Germany. Talking about the Afghan war, thinking about the one on the home front.’\textsuperscript{56} To be clear, however, what is under discussion here is not the tendencies of individual journalists to draw on war metaphor to make politics more interesting or accessible for the public (although that does occur). Rather, the examples provided, I suggest, are indicative of a broader culture that sees politics in particularly combative, warlike terms.

The question to be asked, then, is what impact this cultural view of politics as war has on women in political leadership. The process according to which Rudd was deposed by his party and Gillard installed as leader, despite being constitutionally legitimate and politically valid, was commonly described as a ‘coup’, a ‘knifing’ or an ‘execution’.\textsuperscript{57} Gillard was accusing of
having ‘blood on her hands’, of being a ‘backstabber’ and was depicted in political cartoons in the garb of an executioner. The application of these violent metaphors to Gillard may suggest their association with masculinity is eroding. Conversely, I contend that the use of these metaphors intensified the public hostility directed at Gillard for her part in Rudd’s replacement. The representation of Gillard’s behaviour as ‘violent’ implied she had transgressed gender norms, and thus heightened the public disapproval of her political actions. Mary Crawford and Barbara Pini have noted that stereotypically masculine behaviour is afforded greater legitimacy in politics than stereotypically feminine behaviour: such legitimacy, however, appears to hinge on whether the actor is a man or a woman. As exemplified in Gillard’s case, women whose behaviour is perceived, even metaphorically, as violent, face a number of layers of hostility and disapproval that are difficult for women, including the most talented and professional, to overcome.

Discussion

As a junior politician, Gillard wrote that the ALP was born in a culture of ‘male bonds, male mateship, male leadership and male aggression.’ A decade later she attained the office of prime minister; yet still, as Anne Summers noted, from the moment she ‘became leader in June 2010, she has run into the view that “being a prime minister is a man’s job”’. This chapter has illustrated some of the cultural reasons this view persists through an examination of public attitudes towards women and war, and the use of war metaphor in political discourse.

The political significance of public attitudes is demonstrated by the extent to which political parties rely on opinion polls and focus groups. Here, I have explored an alternative source of public attitudes: the opinions posted in response to online news reporting. These attitudes are valuable for a number of reasons. As spontaneous comments, they are not subject to influence from a scholarly agenda. Further, while the veracity of some details may not be certain, scholarly research has found that most internet users maintain substantial links between their online and offline selves. The variety of opinions found in these online public debates (although not always particularly ‘informed’), and the considerable number of people who engage in this form of political discussion, provide a valuable snapshot of the public mood.

The particular significance of public attitudes for women politicians is that ‘cultural factors’, including attitudes towards gender roles, have been found to influence the proportion of women elected to parliaments. My analysis of contemporary public attitudes found strong evidence of such ‘cultural’ gender norms. Overall, the sample was divided on the question of
whether women should be directly involved in military combat, although women were more likely than men to support the Australian government’s pending removal of restrictions to women’s service in the ADF. Further, this public discussion makes clear that traditional gender stereotypes (men are warriors, women are nurturers) continue to influence attitudes towards women in war. The use of war metaphors in politics, then, subtly embeds these same stereotypes in the mainstream political discourse. Until the power of these gender stereotypes is challenged and dismantled, the masculinising, divisive and exclusionary effects of war metaphors will continue to have a negative impact on women.

The traditional association between leadership and masculinity has been recognised as problematic for women, and the fine line women in political leadership must walk to balance political competence with appropriate displays of femininity has been well documented. This chapter extends this understanding by identifying war metaphors as one of the mechanisms enabling women’s behaviour to be interpreted as ‘masculine’ and therefore deemed inappropriate. A woman’s perceived transgression of gender norms concerning violence exacerbates the ‘incongruence’ of a woman in power and creates myriad difficulties that male politicians do not suffer. This was demonstrated, for example, in the federal election that followed shortly after Gillard’s rise to power: the negative attitudes towards women and violence may be one among a number of factors that explains why the swing away from the ALP under Gillard’s leadership was double for men (8.8 per cent) compared to women (4.4 per cent).

The visibility of women in politics has a distinct symbolic significance; as Sawer, Tremblay and Trimble have explained, ‘the presence of women in parliament increases respect for women in society and is a form of recognition of the equal status of women’. In the light of the public attitudes discussed here, there is a similar symbolism inherent in the visibility of women as equals in war, although I suggest that this extends beyond the ADF. Such a presence will challenge the paternalist attitudes that underwrite persistent gender stereotypes, not just in relation to war but also in politics and other ‘masculine’ domains that utilise stereotypes to exclude women. Thus, what is critically needed is a decoupling of war and masculinity, via the inclusion of women in discourses and domains of power. The Australian Government’s removal of all gender-based restrictions to ADF jobs is a positive and timely step in this regard. Of course, the relatively small legislative amendments required to change this policy will not directly, or quickly, have an impact on public attitudes. Many feminists have argued against women’s participation in war in any capacity, while others have argued that the culture of the military remains unsuitable for women. Objections to women in combat come from all quarters, suggesting women face a long and difficult road to social
acceptance in this domain. While one of the strongest bastions of hegemonic masculinity remains unchallenged, however, society will continue to dictate what is acceptable for women, and where women do and do not belong, simply on the basis of gender. Thus, slow as this change may be, it is critical. Women’s access to, and acceptance in, positions of leadership will improve, as women are recognised not only as victims and as objects for protection, but as capable as men of being protectors and wielders of power.

A number of questions raised in this discussion point to the need for further research. The issue of whether women more than men utilise gender anonymity online was foreshadowed in an earlier section; further investigation would assist our understanding of women’s self-expression in online environments. It would also be useful to explore whether discussion topics that relate explicitly to gender, as in the present case, result in a higher proportion of gender anonymous comments than non-gendered discussions, as this would reveal whether certain online discussions are threatening for users of any gender. Further, my analysis suggests a divide in the attitudes of men and women to the topic of women in war. An examination of attitudes towards women’s participation in other traditionally masculine fields, such as firefighters or engineers, could identify whether stereotypical gender norms hinder women in other domains. Related to this, research into the impact of war metaphors beyond war and politics would be fruitful. Finally, there is a wealth of public opinion online waiting to be explored in an academic context. Further research that sheds light on the influence these public attitudes have on women’s experiences will enhance current understandings of women’s social status in Australia and around the world.

Conclusion

The slow progress of gender equality in the military, and the seeming regularity with which sex scandals occur in the ADF, signal a need not only for institutional change, but an examination of the broader Australian culture within which this institution is located. The points of intersection between political and war discourses shape public attitudes towards gender, and consequently impact on cultural beliefs and practices. This chapter’s analysis of online comments concerning women and war has revealed the pervasiveness in public attitudes of stereotypical assumptions about women’s strength, physiology, communal roles and social ‘fit’. As powerful vehicles for the implicit communication of such stereotypes, war metaphors render these attitudes salient when used in political discourse. This chapter argues that the public use of war metaphors perpetuates gender norms, and thus is one factor contributing to the scarcity of women in leadership and the difficulties women continue to face as leaders.
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15 Talbot, 117.
25 Smith, 127.
33 McKenna and Bargh, 64.
35 Smith, 126–7.

Smith, 126–7.

Shepherd.

Hamilton.


Smith, 126–7.

Sheridan.

Shepherd.

Ibid.; Hamilton.

Sheridan.


63 While Gillard has battled criticisms for Rudd’s removal that persist more than two years later, allegations and incidences of actual violence and aggression committed by former ALP leader Mark Latham received far less attention and criticism. See Barry Donovan, Mark Latham: The Circuitbreaker (Rowville: The Five Mile Press, 2004), 232–40.

