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THE “BENEVOLENT” JAPAN SELF-DEFENSE FORCES AND THEIR UTILIZATION OF WOMEN*

FUMIKA SATO ** AND NORA WEINEK ***

I. Introduction

This paper explores how “benevolent” militaries undertaking postnational defense utilize women and femininity, through the example of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF). Militaries are androcentric and masculinist organizations all over the world, but this does not mean that women and femininity are not involved in militaries (Enloe 1993). Since the second half of the 20th century, more and more women have enlisted in militaries and their roles have been gradually expanded. However, women have never been treated as simply “one of the boys.” In this gendered organization, even women who perform their duties the same way as men have been expected to emphasize and mobilize their femininity in various ways.

Today, most militaries are not simply tasked with homeland security; rather, they are expected to cooperate with foreign nations and concern themselves with the security situation beyond national borders. Annica Kronsell (2012), who names this phenomenon “postnational defense,” explains that militaries are increasingly participating in peace operations, which entail transgressing national borders to save distant others in the name of “human rights.” This seemingly benevolent agenda is in fact characterized by a neoliberal ideology that attempts to democratize and liberalize countries and economies worldwide. Accompanied with the neoliberal ideas of progress, order, competition, and economic rationality, postnational defense normalizes inter-state intervention and links humanitarian operations with military ones.

This new paradigm militarizes humanitarianism, rather than humanizing the military. States performing this militarized humanitarianism need others to whom they can bring justice and freedom in order to prove their righteousness. Through partaking in postnational defense, developed countries construct gendered others as either violent and hyper-masculine or helpless and feminine, while they simultaneously reproduce their own superiority. This construction of national and cultural identity in opposition to inferior others in need of help mirrors imperialist ideologies.

Looking at these agendas with a feminist curiosity, we come to realize that postnational defense, as a form of imperialism, is intrinsically gendered. As Gayatri C. Spivak has taught us, according to an imperialist logic, a “good society” is one which protects women “from her own kind” (Spivak 1988: 299). Of course, in this paradigm, these “saved” women are not granted...
any subjectivity. According to Kelly Oliver, women are objectified in imperialist discourse, so that they might become free subjects (Oliver 2007: 64).

This paper uses Japan as a case study, showing how the SDF depend on women and femininity in various ways in order to create their “benevolent” image correlating with the participation in postnational defense as a member of “good (global) society.” One might be inclined to think of the SDF, who are seemingly bound by Article Nine of the Japanese constitution, as a unique case, but we do not believe so. In her pioneering works, Sabine Frühstück (2004, 2007) has made clear that the relationship between the SDF and Japanese society is not a deviation from international norms, but can be understood as an avant-garde example of military-societal configurations in the era of postnational defense. Firstly, based on research by Fumika Sato (2004, 2010, 2012), we take a brief look at the history of women in the SDF and examine the space women have occupied in recruiting campaigns compared to the actual situation of women in the SDF. Next, we shed light on the current Japanese government’s camouflaging use of women in regard to the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. Then we take a look at the Japanese Self-Defense Forces’ increasing employment of the “warrior-princess of peace” in order to appeal to a global audience and position Japan as a developed global power. In the conclusion, we situate our case study in the context of critical research on (gendered) humanitarian activity and consider it as the potential rise of a new form of imperialism.

II. The History of Women in the SDF

Under the U.S.-led occupation after World War II, Japan was completely demilitarized. Article Nine of Japan’s new constitution promulgated in 1946 forbids Japan from maintaining military forces or using war in order to settle international disputes. This demilitarization policy underwent a reversal with the dawning of the Cold War. Foreign policy makers in Washington started to conceive of Japan’s potential to become a Pacific ally in the war against communism. Therefore, the general headquarters (GHQ) of the Allied forces urged Japan to remilitarize. Thus, the new Japanese post-war military force came into being as the National Police Reserve in 1950. At first, the organization was only introduced as a means to strengthen Japan’s police power. That is, in order to avoid a conflict with the Article Nine prohibition, Japanese government officials defined it as a police force with only domestic duties.

In 1952, the Japanese government renamed and reorganized the Police Reserve as the National Safety Forces. They were further militarized by uniting with the maritime branch. However, the organization continued to be formally treated as a police organization, so as not to create a conflict with Article Nine. Finally, in 1954, after the Japanese government concluded the Mutual Security Act (MSA) with the U.S., the Safety Forces were renamed again, this time the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. This is the name by which they are still known today. As of March 31st, 2019, the SDF have 226,547 professional members, making them a comparatively large military organization (Japanese Ministry of Defense 2019: 533). In 2018, the SDF’s budget was $46.6 billion, and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute ranked Japan as the country with the ninth highest military expenditure worldwide.1

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1 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. “Military Expenditure by Country as Percentage of Government
However, Article Nine has been interpreted by the Japanese government to permit Japan to possess the minimum level of armed force needed for national defense, and the Japanese Government insists that the Self-Defense Forces are not exceeding this limitation.²

During the first decade of these new Japanese military forces, women were permitted to work only in nursing jobs. Later, the gender structure of the SDF changed significantly and the number and types of jobs that women could perform in the SDF gradually expanded. From 1954 to 2018, the number of women in the SDF has steadily grown. In the fiscal year 2017, 14,686 women were serving, comprising 6.5% of the SDF (Japanese Ministry of Defense 2018: 514). However, as Figure 1 shows, this percentage is still quite low compared to the NATO countries' averages.

The average number of active duty female military personnel in the armed forces of NATO member nations in 2017 was 11.1%.³ The Japanese Ministry of Defense (MOD) is aware of the fact that the number of women in the SDF is still comparatively low. In 2017,

**Figure 1. Women Active Duty Military Personnel in the Armed Forces of NATO Member States and Japan in 2017.**

![Graph showing the percentage of women active duty military personnel in the armed forces of NATO member states and Japan in 2017.](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/SIPRI-Milex-data-1949-2018_0.xlsv


they released the “Initiative of Active Promotion of Female SDF members,” in which they pledged to at least double the percentage of female SDF members.  

The limitations for female members have also changed multiple times in the last fifty years. Until the enacting of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) in 1986, female members of the SDF were permitted only to do the types of work that were thought to be better suited to women. In other words, women were doing work that was considered “feminine,” meaning positions such as personnel, administration, accounting, nursing, and communications.

This changed in 1986. When the EEOL was brought into force, the Japanese Defense Agency decided to also significantly increase and diversify the jobs available to women in the SDF. Through this “reform,” women working in the SDF not only increased significantly, but they were now also working in positions which had previously been considered “masculine,” like engineering, artillery, and air defense control.

In 1993, the SDF opened all jobs nominally, but they closed some assignments, such as F-15 jet fighters and submarines, in order to protect motherhood and privacy. Government officials did not want these changes in the roles of women to drastically alter the SDF’s gendered structures. This resulted in some rather contradictory situations, such as women being able to join regiments like the infantry and armor, but not the squadron that will be deployed to the battlefront.

Nonetheless, female SDF members’ participation appears to have been deemed a success in the eyes of the SDF officials, considering more and more positions are being opened up to women since the start of the 21st century. In 2015, the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (hereafter Air SDF) allowed women to become pilots of fighter jets and spy planes, and in 2017, the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (hereafter Ground SDF)’s infantry and tank units also opened up to women. Furthermore, in 2018, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (hereafter Maritime SDF) announced that they would open up positions on submarines by 2023. Today, most positions are open to women, except those which are considered to endanger women’s motherhood, like the “Nuclear Biological Chemical Weapon Defense Unit” and the “Tunnel Warfare Unit.”

There are multiple reasons for this expansion of women’s positions, one being the impact of international conventions and national laws related to gender equality. The “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women” (CEDAW), often described as an international bill of rights for women, was adopted by the UN in 1979 and finally ratified by Japan in 1985. The Japanese government enacted the EEOL in 1986, which was followed by the “Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society” in 1999. This law positioned the realization of a Gender Equal Society, defined as a society in which men and women respect each other’s human rights and share responsibilities, and one in which every citizen is able to fully display their individuality and ability regardless of gender, as the most important issue in determining the framework of 21st-century Japan.

The Japanese Defense Agency was influenced by this resolution and therefore established the “Defense Agency Headquarters for the Promotion of

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Gender Equality” in 2001, and in the following year decided to increase the number of uniformed female SDF members to 10,000 women.

These laws were designed to enhance gender equality in the Japanese employment market and society. In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325, which is aimed at increasing the participation of women and incorporating gender perspectives in all United Nations’ peace and security efforts. Based on this resolution, Japan established its National Action Plan in 2015, which states that in the field of peace and security, Japan needs to further protect women and girls, support gender mainstreaming, and promote women’s participation in decision making processes.

However, as Sato (2012) has discussed, there are other reasons for promoting women’s recruitment in the SDF which are unrelated to an equality agenda. Since they are reasons unique to military organizations, it is therefore misleading to perceive women’s integration into the military as evidence of gender equality. We propose that the reality of women’s integration in the military is more complex, and it is at least partly driven by an agenda of political symbolism.

III. Women’s Roles in National SDF Recruitment Campaigns

In this section, we will examine a number of representative recruiting posters and explore the roles women have played in the image creation of the SDF.

Figure 2 is an SDF recruiting poster from 1971 that shows two female SDF members and five male SDF members holding the national flag. Although the flag-centered image is
nationalistic, the slogan “Young power to defend peace” helps to prevent the invocation of a militaristic image. The first white paper published by the Defense Agency in 1970 emphasizes that “SDF members are the same as ordinary citizens. They are uniformed citizens” (Japanese Defense Agency 1970: 55). We propose that the main image the SDF have been trying to portray is that of citizens participating positively in society, and that women have played a vital part in creating this image.

Figure 3 is an SDF recruiting poster from 1976, which shows two men arm-wrestling while being surrounded by four women and three men in uniform. It is accompanied by the slogan “Friendship develops, trust is born.”

Figure 4 is an SDF recruiting poster from 1973, which shows a male SDF official in the center surrounded by young civilian friends, five men and two women. The slogan is “We are students in our youth! Human, comrade, friendship, yesterday, today, tomorrow, the meeting of fresh spirits is an important time!”

The world within these posters is a happy, peaceful, and joyous one, without war or danger. The presence of women in each of these posters aids in creating this warm image of the SDF’s friendship with civilians. The insertion of women into images of the SDF makes the SDF look less like a special organization and more like a normal part of Japanese society.

Figure 5 and Figure 6 are SDF recruiting posters from 1954 and 1984, which illustrate the shifting gender profile in the recruitment posters. Figure 5 is a painting and Figure 6 is a photograph, but their composition is identical. In each, three soldiers stand in line: one from the Ground SDF, a second from the Maritime SDF, and the last from the Air SDF. In the first picture the three men are not smiling, while in the second one, the women are smiling broadly. Moreover, Figure 5 states merely “Ground SDF, Maritime SDF, Air SDF, recruiting now.” In Figure 6, however, the slogan reads “We love your vitality.” The word “love” (suki) often appears in SDF posters featuring female models (see Figure 7, below).

Figure 7 is an SDF recruiting poster from 1987, which shows a girl and a male SDF member both smiling broadly, while the girl clings admiringly to the man’s arm, with the slogan, “I love a reliable person.”

Figure 3. SDF Recruiting Poster, 1976.

Note: Photo taken by Fumika Sato.
Figure 4. SDF Recruiting Poster, 1973.

Figure 5. SDF Recruiting Poster, 1954.

Figure 6. SDF Recruiting Poster, 1989.

www.jda.go.jp/j/library/poster/jipo2.htm

Note: Photo taken by Japanese Ministry of Defense.

Note: Photo taken by Japanese Ministry of Defense.
Another example of female members being used to promote the SDF is “Operation Wine Red.” This was a strategy used during the 1990s in which women in the SDF were encouraged to participate in beauty pageants. One woman actually won a prefectural contest, and her title, “Miss Kochi” was then used to promote the SDF.

In recent years, local recruitment divisions are using anime characters on their recruitment posters. As Figure 8 and Figure 9 show, they use cute female anime characters that equate joining the SDF with becoming the hero of an anime adventure.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Defense has produced recruiting campaigns featuring famous female pop idols as spokeswomen. Figure 10 is a still from a movie clip featuring a member of the famous Japanese pop idol group AKB48, Haruka Shimazaki. She addresses the viewer, saying, “There is work you can only do here” (Koko de shika dekinai shigoto ga arimasu).

Examining the image campaigns used by the SDF, we conclude that, when compared to the actual number of women in the SDF, they overrepresent female members to the public. While the inclusion of some token women in recruitment materials has been observed in other militaries as well, such overrepresentation as in the case of Japan is still rare. Melissa T. Brown, who has done an extensive analysis of recruitment posters used by the U.S. Forces, concludes that the expansion of women’s roles in Iraq and Afghanistan did not lead to a corresponding expansion of the roles of female service members in most recruiting materials (Brown 2012: 183). Sato, who has analyzed over 170 SDF recruitment posters from the period of 1950 to 2002, points out that, besides attracting new recruits, these posters are also an important tool in influencing the public image of the SDF (Sato 2004: 185). In this way, the overrepresentation of women can be viewed as an attempt to soften the image of the SDF by “feminizing” it. In Japan, where the majority of the population has been sceptical towards the SDF because of Japan’s history of militarism and the implications of Article Nine, making the SDF look less masculine and thus less militaristic seems like a smart strategy for appealing to the public. And it appears to be working, or at least SDF officials have reason to believe it is.

As Figure 11 shows, the public’s image of the SDF has been improving steadily. In 1975, the percentage of Japanese people with a good impression of the SDF was around 69%. By
2000, over 82% of Japanese citizens held a favorable impression of the SDF. As of 2018, 89.8% of the Japanese population has a good impression of the SDF. Considering the central role images of women have played in promoting the SDF, analyzing the above data without any gender curiosity can only lead to a partial understanding of militarization in Japan. We have to take seriously the role women have played in representing the SDF to Japanese citizens, and the focus on femininity in public images, in order to understand how...
inconspicuous militarization occurs.

IV. The Japanese Government’s Female Empowerment Disguise

In this section, we will go into greater detail about the current strategies the Japanese government follows in regard to women and the SDF and ask how genuine their commitment is.

In August of 2015, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe enacted the “Act on Promotion of Women’s Participation and Advancement in the Workplace,” and finally announced the completion of Japan’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security at the end of September at the UN General Assembly in New York. These actions were aimed at regaining some international standing, as Japan lags behind other advanced countries regarding gender equality. Following Liv Coleman (2017), who situates Japan’s “Womenomics” Diplomacy as a strategic campaign in response to the twin stigmas of Japan’s low rankings on international indexes of gender equality and the “comfort women” issue, we believe that they also had the effect of softening Prime Minister Abe’s image, as he has acquired quite a reputation for being a hawkish historical revisionist. In fact, Abe has succeeded in being chosen by UN Women as one of the ten male heads of state and government to promote the dynamic engagement of women through top-down means. Following up on Prime Minister Abe’s guidelines, the MOD announced the ‘Initiative of Active Promotion of Female SDF members’ in 2017:

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure11.png}
\caption{Change in Public Perception of the SDF.}
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Good impression & 68.8 & 69.2 & 75.4 & 71.3 & 74.3 & 76.7 & 67.5 & 76.8 & 80.5 & 82.2 & 84.9 & 91.7 & 92.2 & 89.8 & 14.1 & 24.3 & 5.3 \\
Bad impression & 31.1 & 30.8 & 24.6 & 25.7 & 25.7 & 23.3 & 32.5 & 23.2 & 19.5 & 17.8 & 15.1 & 9.3 & 7.8 & 10.2 & 75.9 & 75.7 & 94.7 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Change in Public Perception of the SDF.}
\end{table}

Note: Graphic created by authors using the data of multiple years.
https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h29/h29-bouei/gairyaku.pdf p.4
The Self-Defense Forces need female members more than ever. [...] We are aiming to raise the rate of women in the SDF while cutting the rate of drop-outs in half. [...] The SDF are more and more turning into a workplace that is open to women. We hope women thinking about employment will knock on our door and boldly take a risk.

The increase of female SDF members appears to have been a conscious decision. Judging from this initiative made by Japanese government officials, one could assume the MOD was committed to the empowerment of women.

However, as Ora Szekely (2019) has warned us, the participation of women can be used as a powerful symbol, without being accompanied by a broader shift in the masculine structure of the military. The furthering of women’s participation and an apparent interest in women’s rights can also be politically motivated. When the MOD lifted a ban on women serving as fighter pilots, they declared that they were aiming to set up an acrobatic flight show with only female pilots for the 2020 Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo (Yomiuri Shimbun, November 11, 2015, evening edition). This example demonstrates how the government’s focus is on putting women into the spotlight but not actually on gender equality.

In 2018, a female SDF officer was dispatched to a Peace Support Training Centre in Ethiopia as “gender advisor.” This is interesting, as Japan is currently ranked 121st in the global gender equality index, far behind Ethiopia, which is currently ranked 82nd. We have to wonder who is advising whom, and with what authority.

Clearly, we need to be careful not to equate a sudden increase in visibility of women in military organizations with an advancement in gender equality. As Kelly Oliver has pointed out, “[s]elective appropriation of feminism and concern for women have become essential to imperialist discourses” (Oliver 2007: 39). The keyword here is “selective”; therefore, paying attention to the context in which an agenda of gender equality is seemingly promoted and the context in which it is not can tell us much about the motivation behind putting women on the front stage of the military.

While the Japanese government aims to position themselves as a nation invested in empowering women through the integration of women into the SDF, they also take advantage of traditional stereotypes which depict women as weak and less able than men. Women have been and continue to be used as symbols for everything that needs protection, often in combination with children.

Article Nine of the Japanese Constitution does not actually mention the right to any form of self-defense. The Japanese Government, however, had interpreted the Article to include Japan’s...
right to individual self-defense. In July 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his cabinet decided to change this interpretation to allow Japan’s “Right to Collective Self-Defense,” enabling Japan to counterattack using force when an allied country—i.e. the United State—is under attack.

Figure 12 is a typical image used by Prime Minister Abe during a press conference in 2014 to defend this decision. The main point was that the Japan Self-Defense Forces were not able to lawfully protect US vessels transporting Japanese expatriates fleeing from conflict. He expressed his readiness to allow the use of the “Right to Collective Self-Defense” in order not to let these situations occur. We can see how women and children are symbolically used to represent the vulnerable Japanese. Specifically, it has been reported that this image presented to the press, had been modified on special orders from Prime Minister Abe to add emphasis on the Japanese mother and children in need of protection (Asahi Shimbun, May 18, 2014, morning edition). This symbolic use of women stands in contrast to his public gender equality policy by stereotyping women in passive, vulnerable roles.

The camouflaging character of the Japanese government’s female empowerment policy becomes even more clear in the statement about the importance of female SDF members included in “the Initiative of Active Promotion of Female SDF Members.” It quotes the following speech, which Prime Minster Abe is said to have given to the SDF’s top brass:

In the struggle for survival, not the strongest one wins but the most adaptable one. In other words, the one who can react flexibly and quickly to changes. In this age where the decreasing of birth rates and the aging of the population continues rapidly, and furthermore in an age where diversified viewpoints are asked for, the strength of women is indispensable even in the field of Defense.

Figure 12. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s Press Conference Imagery for Justifying Collective Self-Defense, May 15th, 2014.

Source: https://nettv.gov-online.go.jp/prg/prg9798.html

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But, there are not enough female SDF members. ...(sic) The biggest challenge is the still deeply rooted male-centric work culture. It is necessary to change this on a fundamental level. This is our problem as men. Changing a long time established organizational culture is not easy, but the participation of women is the “touchstone” of whether the SDF are able to adapt to this new age.11

Abe is quite clear in stating that one of the biggest motivations behind this policy is the declining birth rate in Japan and the resulting lack of male SDF recruits. He goes on equating the integration of women into military structures as a “touchstone” for the adaptation of Japan to a “new age.” In other words, having women in the military is a signifier of a developed civil society. Women, in short, give the military structure a modern image makeover.

As we can see from the above examples, the government’s apparent commitment to female empowerment is more than anything a public relations campaign aimed to showcase Japan’s progressive gender politics for domestic and international audiences.

V. The Global Featuring of the “Warrior Princess of Peace”

In this section, we will take a closer look at the complex ways women and activities often associated with notions of “traditional” femininity, such as peacekeeping, are being used to create a specific image of the SDF, and the way this image is being used to attempt to reach an international audience.

Using the catchphrase “proactive pacifism” or more recently “proactive contribution to peace,”12 Japan has been pursuing a new international security strategy. Stefanie A. Weston describes this strategy as the continuation of Japan’s shift towards shedding the legacy of Article Nine and becoming a “normal” state—i.e. one with offensive military capacity (Weston 2014: 170). Japan’s current security strategy implies that, in order for Japan to gain international standing, it needs to increase its contributions to international military actions, especially in the form of international peacekeeping missions. That is to say, it is necessary to participate in the same activities as other so-called “normal” countries. This sort of perspective is rooted in the link between contemporary nationalism and militarism. As Sandra Whitworth has put it, according to this perspective, “countries without a legitimate military are not only vulnerable to invasion, they are suspect nations: immature and not fully formed” (Whitworth 2004: 34). Today there exists a rarely questioned premise, which assumes that “normal” states must strive to match their economic strength with military power (Frühstück and Ben-Ari 2002: 2).

Frühstück and Eyal Ben-Ari (2002) have shown through numerous interviews with members of the SDF that they have employed various strategies since the end of the cold war in order to achieve “normalization.” “Normalization,” as opposed to “re-militarization” means the acceptance of the SDF as the “legitimate arm of a democratic, civilian controlled state,” that

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11 See footnote 4.
is to say, the SDF strive to be like the “armed forces of other advanced industrialized democracies” (Ibid.: 6). Interestingly, however, the seemingly nontraditional military roles the SDF have been exclusively engaged in are becoming the norm for the armed forces of other industrialized nations (Ibid.: 37-38). For instance, Whitworth notes that Canada, as a middle-power, has constructed its self-less national identity as distinct from the United States through peacekeeping operations (Whitworth 2004: 90-91). That is, for some countries, peacekeeping is an essential tool to legitimize not only the nation’s military but also the nation itself. She states that Japan, as well as Argentina and Germany, have actively participated in peacekeeping operations “both to resuscitate their respective national militaries and to revitalize the national image and international standing” (Ibid.: 15).

Indeed, we can find this logic in the rhetoric used by the Japanese Ministry of Defense. In a document published on its official website, the MOD states that “the international community expects Japan to play a more proactive role for peace and stability in the world.”13 Notably, this paper was published in both Japanese and English. The Ministry of Defense (known as the Defense Agency until 2006) has published White Papers as annual official reports since 1976, and they have been translated into English, Russian, Chinese, and Korean since 200514. So are many of their other official documents and articles, including even a comic and a number of videos that they have uploaded to YouTube. The MOD and Prime Minster Abe are ready for Japan to become a “normal” nation, and they want to persuade the international community of its commitment to peace and security in the world.

These promotional materials, now also targeting an international audience, still at least partly continue the strategy discussed in the previous section of over-representing women in the SDF and feminizing the SDF themselves. We will take an example from “Manga-style Defense of Japan 2017.” 15 This manga is about three kids, two boys and a girl named Sora (which means sky in English), who decide to do a school project to find out more about the SDF, since both of the girl’s parents are working in the SDF. Sora’s mother is a captain in the Air SDF, while her father is a major in the Ground SDF. The children also visit the Ministry of Defense, where a female Maritime SDF lieutenant commander shows them around. That means two out of the three SDF members in this comic are women. While the girl’s mother is lower in rank than her husband (and we suspect this is most likely so as not to endanger traditional family gender hierarchies), the second female SDF member introduced is equal in rank to Sora’s father. The focus of the comic is on the many humanitarian activities the SDF is involved in overseas.

Pictured in Figure 13, the comic ends with all three kids declaring they want to become SDF members too and “protect Japan together.” The boys both want to be like Sora’s father, while Sora herself says she wants “to join the Air SDF someday, to protect the sky, like mom.” Interestingly, even though there are three children and three SDF members, respectively representing the Air SDF, Ground SDF, and Maritime SDF, both boys state they want to be

just like the only male SDF member in the story. This is even more surprising in light of the fact that one of the boys keeps talking about how much he loves ships and how his “dream is to join the Maritime SDF and to get on a Maritime SDF destroyer.” Still, he does not want to be like the female Maritime SDF member, but rather like the male Ground SDF member, suggesting that the makers of the comic still consider female SDF members to be less worthy of hero worship than males.

The next example is the most recent video produced by the Ministry of Defense, entitled, “Promotion of Active Engagement of Female SDF Personnel: Adapting to the New Age and Environment towards an Attractive SDF.” As Figure 14 shows, the video is built up like a recruitment campaign to get women to enlist in the SDF, stating all the benefits the SDF has to
offer women. This begs the question, why did they produce an English version of the video? At least for the English version of the video, the main motivation behind its production can only be to promote the SDF’s image of being committed to empowering women to an overseas audience.

Figure 15 is an example of the government promoting its security policy using feminized pacifist images. Within the pink frame, we can see a female SDF soldier teaching a foreign girl how to make an origami crane. Although this is a domestic promotion, the same kind of benevolent, peaceful, and feminine images repeatedly appear in an English newspaper published by the MOD. That means they too are intended as SDF promotion material for an international audience.

The Ministry of Defense included a special section on “Active Participation of Female Personnel” in “Defense of Japan 2017.” Figure 16, which appeared in this special section, features female SDF members interacting with African children. This highlights the fact that some of the activities performed by female SDF members are those which, for practical reasons, male soldiers cannot or are not allowed to perform. Female SDF members working as peacekeepers can interact with local women without violating the cultural norms of the host community. They can gather information about the local community and understand their specific needs. This helps with developing programs that can specifically target the needs of the local community. In addition, women can play symbolic roles that help ease tensions between the military and the local community, especially between male soldiers and the local men. For these reasons, we see more women being stationed overseas in international peace operations. Women can make certain operations go more smoothly than men. They are sometimes considered an “antidote” to the military’s bad reputation (Kronsell 2012: 142).

We do not wish to deny the significance of these women’s activities. However, we believe it is necessary to take a closer look at them to see if there could be a hidden agenda at play. As we will see below, such benevolent and humanitarian activities can mask a reality of military

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17 See footnote 14.
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violence and aid an imperialistic agenda. In this new kind of imperialism, a tough and gentle “warrior-princess-of-peace”\textsuperscript{18} will save, care, and construct rather than kill, hurt, and destroy.

VI. Conclusion: Gendered Humanitarianism as a New Form of Imperialism

The end of the Cold War gave rise to what is now called a “new humanitarianism” as postnational defense. This ideology of democratizing and liberalizing countries and economies following a neoliberal ideology has been characterized by the normalization of inter-state intervention “on behalf of people suffering from disasters and/ or civil conflict” (Christie 2017: 337). Another characteristic is the way it links humanitarian actions with military actors and even the use of violence, making advanced countries’ militaries “core humanitarian actors, working in natural and social emergencies” (Ibid.). Catherine V. Scott connects this new morality, which advocates the use of military force for humanitarian aims, with a shift in the configuration of imperial power. This “new world order imperialism” aims to remake societies according to a neoliberal agenda (Scott 2006: 98). Ryerson Christie has described the shift in the understanding of international security as follows:

Disasters which result in or from the displacement of peoples, the erosion of the capacity of states, and the breakdown of normally functioning society, are portrayed as being sources of insecurity. Humanitarian action is now seen as crucial to the achievement of security, and state actors have taken lead roles in its pursuit. This rise of state concern for humanitarianism has not resulted in the supremacy of development and humanitarian actors over the security sector, but has rather contributed to the rise of the security sector. (Christie 2017: 337)

To put it differently, rather than humanizing the military, this new paradigm has led to a militarization of humanitarianism.

Noam Chomsky has described this humanitarian shift in the raison d’être for militaries after the end of the Cold War as now being dedicated to the “mission of upholding human rights and bringing justice and freedom to suffering people everywhere, by force if necessary” (Chomsky 1999: 4). The “enlightened states” performing these humanitarian duties need suffering others they can bring justice and freedom to in order for them to prove their own righteousness (Ibid.). These others are frequently represented as “disordered, chaotic, tribal, primitive, pre-capitalist, violent, exclusionary, and child-like” (Orford 2003: 47). Following Whitworth, we can say that humanitarian operations thus serve “as part of the contemporary colonial encounter, establishing knowledge claims about both “us” and “them,” knowledge claims that then serve to legitimate the missions themselves” (Whitworth 2004: 15).

These arguments coincide with Jenny Edkins, who stresses that “humanitarianism is not a timeless truth,” but should rather be conceptualized as an “ideology that has had particular functions and taken different forms at different times in the contemporary world” (Edkins 2003: 254). She continues her argument, reflecting on the constitutive nature of humanitarianism:

The assumption is that “we” and “they” are already distinct, before there is any

\textsuperscript{18} This is a modified version of the term “warrior-prince-of-peace” used by Whitworth (2004: 12).
relationship between us. The only question to be resolved is whether and how “we” should help “them” – and it is not seen as problematic to look for general ahistorical rules that will provide solutions to those questions. (Ibid.: 255)

Edkins claims that an abstract humanitarianism which is “independent of the historical context” is part of the politics which produce sovereign states (Ibid.: 257). Likewise, Laura Shepherd has brought to our attention that “International Security” is performatively constructed and conceptualized through western values, which are not made the subject of any criticism but are instead considered unquestionable (Shepherd 2007: 248). In a new era of imperialism, contributing to international security through engagement in humanitarian operations as postnational defense establishes “us” as superior in the global system while constructing “them” as either violent and hyper-masculine or as helpless and feminine others.

“We,” the “enlightened states,” do not attempt to view the act of “us” helping “them” in the context of historical continuity. In Japan’s case, Hisako Motoyama (2018) has examined the formulation process of Japan’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and explains how the current administration positions itself as a powerful liberal democracy, while erasing all memory of sexual slavery in Japan’s past. The current Japanese government insists that Japan has to reform its Peace Constitution in order to become a full-fledged member of the international community who partakes in collective security. However, they are only concerned with global responsibility and a future in which Japan will become a devoted leader and global role model for other states without looking at its past. This contradiction becomes the most apparent when Japan attempts to position itself as one of the most gender-equal countries while refuting most national and international requests to address its own history of militarized sexual exploitation of women, namely the “comfort women” issue.

We will highlight the case of one prominent female SDF member. The way the Japanese government has dealt with her can be interpreted as symptomatic of the attitude the Japanese government holds towards issues of gender. Ground SDF Lieutenant Colonel Chizu Kurita in Figure 17 could be considered the most iconic female SDF member. She plays an essential part in the image creation of the SDF as an advanced international organization and photographs of her have frequently been used to promote the SDF in Japan and overseas. She was also sent to NATO Headquarters as an adviser to the NATO Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security from December 2014 to July 2017. According to a press statement from the SDF, dispatching a female SDF member to the NATO Headquarters was “expected to further enhance cooperative relationship (sic) between Japan and the NATO.”

Even though Kurita is being held up as exemplifying Japan’s (militarized) commitment to advancing gender equality worldwide, it appears she is only allowed to represent and never to question this very advancement. When Kurita reported on the website of the Embassy of Japan in Belgium that she met with Radhika Coomaraswamy, the former United Nations Commission on Human Rights Special Rapporteur, Kurita was harshly criticized. The meeting was condemned because Coomaraswamy had written a report about the Japanese military forcing women to work as “comfort women” against their will during the Asia-Pacific War. Up until this point, Kurita’s blog on the website of the Embassy of Japan in Belgium had been a useful

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tool for the Japanese government in promoting the SDF, but after Kurita wrote an article commemorating her exchange with Coomaraswamy, Japanese right-wingers, including male SDF officials, regarded Kurita’s expression that she was honored to meet Ms. Coomaraswamy as problematic. In the end, she was forced to erase her description of this meeting from her blog. It appears she is only allowed to promote the advancement of gender equality in a way that is comfortable to the current SDF. This incident discloses that the SDF’s commitment to gender equality and female empowerment is largely symbolic. Women are easily disempowered and deprived of their agency if their actions do not align with the agenda of the SDF especially, and the Japanese government generally.

We need to realize the ways in which the integration of women and the related “benevolent” rebranding of the SDF may have made us blind to gendered humanitarianism’s role in an era of new imperialism. Since the end of the Second World War, the Japanese government has used women and femininity to establish an image of the SDF as a peaceful organization nationally and globally. This strategy is not unique to Japan, but rather pioneering the new emerging postnational defense since the end of the Cold War. Critically analyzing the “benevolent” Self-Defense Forces helps us understand more about new emerging forms of global imperialism.

REFERENCES


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20 A transcript of the press conference in which the Japanese government explains the decision to have the entry from Kurita’s blog deleted has been translated into English and put up on the homepage of the Ministry of Defense: “Press Conference by the Defense Minister Nakatani.” MOD. Published July 17, 2015. http://www.mod.go.jp/e/press/conference/2015/07/17.html


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