Examing the Pregnancy Continuum in the U.S. Military

People were like “Oh, isn’t it hard being a woman in the military?” and I’m like “You know, I bet it’s harder for a woman at a bank or at a law firm, where she has to negotiate these same gender issues, but she has no one fighting for her.”

—Elizabeth*

In the summer of 2012, several events related to women’s maternity experiences sparked public conversations in the United States about (in)appropriate maternal behavior. Kicking it off was an image of Jamie Lynne Grumet, a slender twenty-six-year-old mother in skinny jeans, featured on the cover of Time magazine’s May 21, 2012, issue breastfeeding her three-year-old son with the headline, “Are You Mom Enough?” Grumet, standing with one hand on her hip, and the other around her son, looks directly at the camera, defiantly. Her son is standing on a chair to reach his mother’s breasts, wearing camouflage pants, hands hanging by his sides. He is simultaneously attempting to look at the camera while nursing from his mother’s breast. Many found the picture of Grumet and her son to be extreme and shocking.1

A few months later, in August of 2012, a second picture circulated that featured two U.S. Air Force women in combat uniform

* Elizabeth is a pseudonym. All the servicewomen interviewed for this project either chose or were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Profiles of the interviewees are included in appendixes B and C.
breastfeeding their babies (figure 1.1). First shared on social media by the Mom2Mom support group in order to promote World Breastfeeding Week, the picture shows two U.S. Air Force servicewomen sitting in a field or park. Both women have their hair pulled back into tight buns, are wearing makeup, and their uniform jackets are unbuttoned to accommodate nursing their children. Terran Echegoyen-McCabe is featured on the left, breastfeeding her ten-month-old twin girls, while Christina Luna is on the right nursing her toddler. Whereas Luna’s daughter is positioned in front of her left breast, concealing her body, Echegoyen-McCabe’s breasts are quite visible, as her shirt has to be pulled up much farther to accommodate feeding two babies simultaneously. The result is an image of Echegoyen-McCabe’s generous cleavage, since her body is un concealed. The picture of Echegoyen-McCabe and Luna generated significant controversy, with some arguing the image was as offensive as urinating or defecating on the military uniform.\(^2\)
Between these photographic events, Marissa Mayer became CEO of Yahoo in July 2012, when she was pregnant and expecting a son in September. Shortly after accepting the position, Mayer announced that she would take only one or two weeks of maternity leave after the birth of her son and that, while she was gone, she would continue to work from home. Shortly after returning from her fleeting maternity leave, Mayer announced that Yahoo would no longer allow telecommuting, a flexible work arrangement many new mothers—and new parents in general—appreciate.

Following these events, in early 2013, Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, released her book, *Lean In*. In it, she encouraged women in the workforce, and especially male-dominated organizations, to “lean in” to opportunities and be more assertive. She also argued that women should not “leave before you leave”—meaning that sometimes, when working women want to have babies, they start to close doors of opportunities, believing that they cannot be successful at work and at home.

Each of these instances generated public discussions and debates about what constitutes (in)appropriate behavior for pregnant women and mothers. And, with the exception of the *Time* magazine cover, they also brought the concept of what it means to be good working mothers front and center. Because of the patriarchal foundations of organizations in general, and male-dominated organizations especially, female workers in tech firms (like Yahoo and Facebook) and the military have historically faced professional challenges related to gender and power, making the focus on women’s maternity even more complex. Whereas discussions of Mayer and Sandberg focused on the work-life balance of the two working mothers, conversations around the picture of the two servicewomen breastfeeding in uniform focused primarily on whether or not it was appropriate to publicly breastfeed in a military uniform. I argue, however, that the image is about being a working mother in the U.S. military and that the controversy stirred up by the image of two women breastfeeding...
in military uniforms revealed how little is known or understood about the maternity experiences of active-duty servicewomen in the U.S. armed forces.

It was when I saw the image of Echegoyen-McCabe and Luna breastfeeding in uniform and read the comments in response to it that this research project initially began. I was curious about the strong negative responses, and wanted to understand why people found it so extremely offensive. This research then led me to ask more questions about servicewomen’s maternity experiences in general, specifically (a) What kind of culture do the discursive practices around pregnancy and maternity in the U.S. military construct? And, (b) in what ways do servicewomen comply with and/or resist this construction and with what consequences? Ultimately, what I discovered is that, although the military is explicitly working to accommodate the reality of motherhood (by offering extensive maternity leave, space and time for pumping, and other policies that will be further discussed in this book), the overall culture of the military in which maternity is seen as a problem has not changed. This policy/culture disconnect is so ingrained that even pregnant servicewomen have internalized it and often perpetuate the discriminatory culture themselves. Therefore, I argue that unless the problematic culture surrounding maternity in the military is challenged, these policy changes will not be as effective as they should be at reducing pregnancy discrimination in the military.

To reach these conclusions, I had to adjust my research methods. Up to that point in my academic career, I had been trained in rhetorical analysis; yet it quickly became apparent that conducting a rhetorical analysis of traditional discourses, such as policies, newspaper stories, and military documents, would not be enough; I was still missing a large piece of the puzzle: the voices of the stakeholders. To be sure, I would have learned much about pregnancy culture in the U.S. military by looking at those documents, but the voices of those most affected would still not be heard, and I would be contributing to their misrepresentation and to the pattern of devaluing their
 voices. Ultimately, efforts to answer my research questions would require expanding my methods.

PIECING THE PUZZLE TOGETHER: NOTES ON METHOD

In order to create a more nuanced cultural context in which to understand servicewomen’s maternity experiences, I employ a critical feminist orientation that draws from others who have combined interviews with extant rhetorical analysis. This approach asserts that rhetoric is not a singular product to be analyzed, such as a speech, but rather is a collection of texts and discourses that create a larger context. In this view, discourse to be examined may include linguistic symbols (e.g., policies, documents, speeches, words) and material symbols (e.g., bodies, photographs, art)—the discursive fragments or puzzle pieces that contribute to the larger puzzle/context under analysis. By referring to these discursive fragments as “rhetorical,” I echo Britt, in order to emphasize that these puzzle pieces “present a point of view, help constitute identities, and influence thought and action.” To be sure, rhetoric is consequential. It is not passive or neutral; it is a constructive power that is always politically and ideologically invested. Therefore, the goal of rhetorical analysis is to investigate, explain, and evaluate texts/puzzle pieces in order to gain a better understanding of the rhetorical processes at work, and how they are (re)constructing particular ideologies.

In the case of this project, the rhetorical fragments/puzzle pieces analyzed include newspaper and magazine articles; military policies, pamphlets, brochures, and procedures; and peer-reviewed journals (both military and nonmilitary). I also conducted interviews with servicewomen who experienced pregnancy while serving on active duty in the U.S. military. I included servicewomen who were pregnant at the time, had been pregnant recently, or had experienced a pregnancy since 2001. The heightened military presence after the terrorist
attacks on September 11, 2001, resulted in more military recruits and a higher number of women serving in the military. Many policy changes regarding women followed suit in efforts to recruit and retain women. Some of these changes include extended maternity leave, required breastfeeding facilities, longer breaks from deployment after giving birth, increased access to abortion, and opening combat positions to women. Therefore, interviewing women who served after changes were enacted provides insight about how women who have more recently served in the U.S. military have experienced pregnancy.

The inclusion of interviews follows other rhetorical scholars who use qualitative methods. It is also driven by the critical feminist call to embrace what Haraway referred to as “situated knowledges,” which welcome the subjective nature of lived experience to better understand how knowledge is socially constructed through discourse. This type of analysis privileges women’s voices to address the multiple issues and experiences and to determine how they are similar, different, or overlapping. Indeed, this was the case for this research, as well. The interviews took place in two phases, using initial recruiting and snowball sampling. In the first phase, I interviewed enlisted servicewomen from the Navy, Air Force, and Army. In the second phase, I interviewed current and recently retired officers in the Navy and Air Force. Because of the different qualifications for enlisted servicemembers and officers, and the related differences in jobs and responsibilities, experiences often differ greatly between enlisted servicewomen and female officers, and interviewing both gave better insight into military maternity experiences across the board. Although the nature of snowball sampling resulted in the recruitment of a majority of Navy servicewomen, participants were still fairly diverse in terms of age, branch, race, and location for the enlisted participants, and all interviews highlighted the diversity and similarity of military pregnancy experiences.

Using interviews to study organizations—and maternity experiences within organizations in particular—is common in the field of communication studies. Yet Cheney and Lair and others have
argued for the importance of using rhetorical methods to study organizations (in this case, the military), as the discoveries can supplement findings from other research perspectives. This creates what Pezzullo calls “critical interruptions,” which allow for a new way of thinking and understanding, and can lead to different solutions.

For example, the U.S. military has some exemplary maternity policies; yet, as the following chapters will demonstrate, despite exponential changes in maternity-related policies—from maternity leave to breastfeeding—servicewomen are still struggling to balance their families and their military careers. Often they must choose to leave the military as a way to find a manageable balance. Using rhetorical analysis as well as interviews in this case may lead to the critical interruptions not discovered by one method alone. For instance, it was through interviewing servicewomen that I had perhaps one of the largest insights/critical interruptions that influenced the organization of my research and this book. It occurred during my interview with Michelle, a retired Navy officer. I asked her specifically about her pregnancy experience as an active-duty servicemember, and she responded by noting that pregnancy experiences are not isolated to the nine months of pregnancy. Instead, as she explained, “pregnancy is sort of all rolled up together with the fact that you then have a baby and then you’re a parent. So, it’s hard to pull out my experiences of pregnancy with my experiences of parenting because they’re all in a continuum. . . . I’m going to consider it part of the same issue.” These few sentences changed how I would frame this project. My initial plan was to only discuss the actual months women were pregnant, which would only provide an extremely limited viewpoint that did not capture the larger maternity and motherhood experience related to pregnancy.

Military Culture: Promoting Social Change

The U.S. military has a long history as a leader in social change, “a forerunner in dealing with racial and gender discrimination
issues.” For instance, when the U.S. military was integrated in 1948, it became a model for integration in larger U.S. society. Additionally, the military is also known for employing a gender- and race-neutral pay scale. This means, as Elizabeth, a retired Navy officer, explained, that women “get equal pay for equal work.” For example, if there is a male and female lieutenant serving at the same command, they earn the same salary. Michelle, a retired Navy officer, explicated,

“They say in general women are paid less than the men. In the military, we're paid exactly the same, and I really liked that, and I liked that I wore my rank and I wore my ribbons and you know where I’ve been and you know what I’ve done and you know what my position is in this organization, you don’t have to look at me and go, “Are you the doctor or are you the nurse? Are you the lawyer or are you legal aid?” And maybe you’ll guess wrong because of my skin color or my sex, [but] in the military, it’s clear, I’m the doctor. I mean it’s obvious. And I’m getting [paid] exactly what every other person of my rank and job is getting.

It is quotes like these, and the one by Elizabeth at the opening of this chapter, that many point to when supporting arguments that gender equality exists in the military.

Furthermore, since 2000, as part of what the Air Force calls “diversity and inclusion initiatives,” significant military policy changes regarding breastfeeding, maternity leave, abortion, and combat have been instituted in order to foster a more appealing work environment for women. Mae, an officer in the Navy, contended that “the military set the bar very high for how they treat pregnant women.” Because the military has recently struggled to maintain troop numbers, creating policies that can recruit and retain women has been crucial. Similarly, the U.S. civilian workforce is struggling to retain women, so these policies may serve as a model once again.

Despite all this praise and the progressive policy changes, which also include a 1974 policy that ended involuntary separations from the military due to pregnancy, there is a long history of the U.S. military framing servicewomen’s fertility as both negative and a “women’s
issue.” For example, a 1979 *Time* article referred to how the military was “coping” with the “pregnancy problem,” and researchers Lundquist and Smith reported that “in 1982, pregnancy was such a problem for the military that the Reagan administration called a halt to recruiting women.” Due to the large number of women leaving the military because of changes in their families, the military was compelled to adjust policies and procedures to maintain retention. Yet, in 2009, a U.S. commander in Iraq threatened to court-martial soldiers for pregnancy in order to highlight “the importance of appropriate reproductive planning for female soldiers.” Although the commander claimed he was prepared to punish both women and men, the emphasis on female soldiers implies the responsibility ultimately rests with women.

Indeed, the importance of women’s fertility planning in the military is often stressed. According to an article in *Military Medicine*, women’s abilities to plan their pregnancies is not only of concern for the armed forces “in terms of troop readiness, deployment, and health care costs, as pregnancy during overseas deployment is a financial and operational burden for the military,” but it also is a “matter of public health as unintended pregnancy can negatively impact women’s and children’s well-being.” These concerns reinforce many cultural discourses about “super moms,” “intensive mothering,” and “good working mothers” and confirms the degree to which social, political, and economic responsibility is placed upon the pregnant servicewomen, omitting any responsibility with regard to men. As Natalie, one of the interviewed enlisted servicewomen in this study, contended, it is not as if “you just choose to get pregnant and there’s no one else involved. . . . We didn’t force them [men] to do that [have sex].”

Furthermore, pregnancy has historically been perceived as a threat to two of “the three Rs” of the U.S. military: readiness and retention. Although policies have changed over the years to increase retention rates of pregnant servicewomen, such as eliminating involuntary discharges for pregnancy and parenthood, concerns about
pregnancy’s negative impact on troop readiness persist. Researchers Duke and Ames concluded, “From a military context, the specter of female soldiers and sailors becoming pregnant compromises the bodily discipline needed to maintain readiness.”39 This statement points to the military’s investments in particular understandings of bodies, sexuality, and difference. A focus on sexuality “dissolves the veneer of . . . gender neutrality,” a so-called goal of the military uniform.40 Additionally, it reinforces what Buzzanell and Ellingson have referred to as the “master narrative” of maternity in the workplace, which associates pregnancy with “deviance, sexuality, the feminine, unreliability, illness, and disability.”41 Servicewomen’s body differences may threaten the key principle of readiness, therefore framing pregnant servicewomen as deviant and pregnancy as problematic.

The belief that pregnancy is a significant factor impacting troop readiness lacks strong evidence. Biggs et al. persuasively argued that no research has found that pregnancy has “a direct negative impact . . . on military readiness.”42 Despite the view of many service-members who believe mothers are “organizational impediments,” multiple sources have acknowledged that women’s absenteeism is not much greater than men’s.43 For example, Thomas and Thomas found that “the amount of lost time from the job does not generally differ for men and women, even when pregnancy and postpartum convalescence leave are included as sources of lost time.”44 Because men are injured at higher rates than women, they are also periodically unavailable for service. A more likely reason for why women’s bodies are problematic may be found in the U.S. military’s culture of hypermasculinity and the tensions caused therein.

**AT THE INTERSECTION: CAUGHT BETWEEN CONTRADICTORY CULTURES**

In examining the maternity experiences of servicewomen, it became apparent to me that women in the military, and even more so mothers,
occupy a liminal space, wherein they are located at the intersection of multiple competing cultures and cultural expectations.

First, pregnant servicewomen are at the intersection of hyper-masculinity and female embodiment. One of the major cultural beliefs in the military is what many have called “military masculinity” or “hypermasculinity,” which often relies on biology and bodies to define difference and power. In its simplest form, masculinity “is the traits, behaviors, images, values, and interests associated with being a man within a given culture. It is not a natural consequence of male biology, but a set of socially constructed practices." Masculinity is often defined in the negative, by what it is not. For example, Kimmel explained that dominant definitions of masculinity in mainstream America depend on the exclusion of others such as women, non-White men, and homosexual men. Exclusion, difference (social and biological), and contrast have been the primary ways to make meaning in the Western philosophical tradition and the male-female binary has been used to “encode a hierarchal relationship or indicate a distribution of power.” Masculinity and masculine roles depend on femininity and roles defined as feminine for their meaning. This binary relationship is even more extreme in the military, which has historically and traditionally been linked to masculinity. Pateman elaborated, “Of all the male clubs and associations, it is in the military and on the battlefield that fraternity finds its most complete expression.” Yet the inclusion of women in the armed forces in increasing numbers and roles makes the link between masculinity and the military more complex and complicated.

Part of the complication is due to the belief that increased numbers of women correlate with progress in gender equality. Enloe explained that even with the high ratios of women serving in militaries around the world—such as in Israel, Libya, Japan, and Sweden—these high percentages must be treated “with caution. They might not be evidence of contemporary ‘postsexist’ enlightenment.” Quantity does not always mean quality, and equality is much more complex. This is problematic because increasing the number of women serving in the
military seems to be a sign of feminist progress, yet their acceptance therein may nonetheless perpetuate and affirm dominant masculinity. Unless militarized masculinity is challenged culturally, gender equality and a decrease in discrimination that military policies try to enact will remain elusive.

The intense existence and persistence of military masculinity and its deep historical roots place servicewomen at an intersection—in the middle of a culture of hypermasculinity (that is more than simply their place of employment, as military service seeps into many other areas of servicemembers’ lives) and their embodied female existence, which places them on the opposing side of the simplistic biological binary that undergirds military hypermasculinity. Many of the difficulties that arise from this intersectional tension, as will be noted throughout this book, are that if women adopt the military masculinity mindset, they may be promoted and successful in the organization, but they are not helping change the culture. Conversely, if women choose not to adopt this type of behavior, they may not experience professional advancement.54

The second tension I have noted is that between community and individualism. On the one hand, the U.S. military attempts to make everyone appear uniform, lacking individual uniqueness. Servicemembers are fighting for a cause bigger than themselves. We often hear talk about the military “brotherhood” and community, and of servicemembers sacrificing their lives for each other. Yet, at the same time, the military exists within a culture of neoliberalism, a political ethos that has become increasingly prominent in the United States, and even more so in the military, which places extreme emphasis on individual responsibility.55 Within neoliberal ideology, the concept of “responsibilization” refers to the expectation that individuals will make “prudent responsible choices to ensure a responsible, self-sufficient future.”56 Responsibilization focuses on the individual rather than the system, and it neglects “the social and political culture in which individual responsibility is embedded and experienced”; it “ignores how choices are exercised within a context