



“GIRLS NEXT DOOR” — WOMEN AS EMOTIONAL LABORERS ON THE FRONT LINES

By Kara Dixon Vuic and Jacqueline E. Whitt August 16, 2019
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Jacqueline Whitt: Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Jacqueline Whitt**, Professor of Strategy at the US Army War College and the War Room Podcast Editor. Thanks for joining us today. Often in contemporary conversations about gender in the military, the focus these days is on the role of women as service members - women are a soldier, sailor, airman or marine - but this isn't the whole story or maybe even most of it. For a long period of American history, women were around and following militaries but not necessarily in them. To talk about some of this development and some of these relationships over the 20th century, I'm really pleased to be joined in the studio by **Dr. Kara Dixon Vuic** who is the Lance Corporal Benjamin W. Schmidt Professor of War, Conflict and Society in 20th century America at Texas Christian University. We're going to talk about the role that civilian women, who participated in formal programs to bring recreation and entertainment to troops serving overseas, played throughout the 20th century. Welcome to War Room, Kara.

Kara Dixon Vuic: Thanks, Jackie.

JW: We'll start with the conceptual level problem for the military. What's the challenge that they envisioned or the problem or opportunity that they see? And what role is it that these civilian women are playing in solving that problem or meeting that challenge?

KDV: In the early days of the United States entering World War I - before actually the US actually enters the war - they start to think about selective service and mobilizing an army and sending them to France, which as everybody knew in the early days of the war was the land of debauchery and evil and nothing good came out of France. When the US government threatened to draft young men and send them to France, the American public started to get very concerned about what might happen to their boys - we're going to send these boys over to France, it's going to be terrible...

JW: Good American, very naïve, innocent boys.

KDV: Good poor boys from home who might possibly be led astray.

JW: By loose French women.

KDV: Floozies, I think is the term. These boys never seek out trouble, it just finds them. They're seduced into trouble. So, all of these progressive era reformers had the very bright idea to send good Christian girls from home who also happened to be cute - send them to France to serve donuts and make small talk and all will be fine. That's the idea. Now, that idea sort of changes over the 20th century. The military kind of gives up the idea that the boys are not going to get into trouble if we just send over girls. But the idea that we have to boost morale, we have to give them something to fight for, we have to send over these kind of supportive images of home, that idea did not go away.

JW: So it starts as a protective moralistic measure and it morphs into still a protective measure but protecting morale and mental health and welfare of American service members overseas. If it changes over time we can talk about that too, but who are the women? You said cute young American girls. Can you talk a little bit more specifically about what that means?

KDV: For most of the 20th century, they are by and large white, middle-class women from middle America. That's the image. These are women who have some post-high school education. By the Vietnam War, they have to have a college degree, so they have some sort of college background. They are outgoing. They are adventurous. They want to do something for the war effort. They want to do their bit as it were. But they're so overwhelmingly single. They're white. They're middle-class. That's sort of the image.

JW: So, sort of narrow slice of American life. It sounds sort of nostalgic, sort of an archetypal Americana idea. The title of your book is *The Girls Next Door*, and I imagine that's what they are supposed to portray.

KDV: Right, average womanhood. She's supposed to, at various times, remind you of your mama, your sister, your sweetheart, possibly your wife. All of those things are very different symbolic roles, but at times the expectation really is that these woman represent all of that. You can be all things to all people. You could sit down and have a cup of coffee with this farm boy from Iowa who's never been away from home and you could be that maternal influence on him, or you could sit down with the college guy from your home state and you could kind of be the draw that gets him into the club, gets him away from trouble so to speak.

JW: Still getting them away from trouble. Are the women who participate in these things, are they recruited? Do they apply? What's the selection process?

KDV: Yeah, there is some recruitment involved from organizations like the Red Cross, from the YMCA, from the USO. It's formal process of application - in terms of the documents - it's still very fluid. You would apply to the Red Cross, for example, in World War II, you would submit some letters of reference, and you would have an interview with a local official if you were white. If you were African-American, you had to go to D.C. to be vetted by the national Red Cross. There was an extra layer of vetting for African American women.

JW: Are these organizations always existing outside of the formal structure of the military?

KDV: With the exception of Special Services, beginning in the Korean War era. Special Services after World War II, the Army in particular, decided to take on some of this morale-boosting work itself, and that became Special Services which then evolved into MWR today.

JW: So these women go overseas. What do they do when they get there?

KDV: They work in recreation huts or clubs - the terminology changes by War - but they go and they work in a club. They serve coffee and donuts. They sell cigarettes sometimes. They organize dances which were a big hit across all wars, of course. By the Vietnam War, they check out the ping pong paddles that you can check out to play, or pool, or that kind of thing. They're running a club. If they're in the USO, they are performers, and that kind of work is a little bit different. They're on tour across the theater.

JW: So entertaining rather than one-on-one interactions. Are the women paid for this work?

KDV: They are paid. It's not exorbitant, but from what I understand - by way that these women characterized it - it was a decent wage for the time and considering that they didn't have living expenses.

JW: And for single women who, post-college, it is certainly not probably a career. This is a temporary thing that they're going to do for a little while. How long do they usually stay?

KDV: In World War I and World War II, your contract was for the duration plus 6 months, just like the military. Though you could leave at any time. It was just - probably contract is a bit too strong of a word even - kind of an understanding. By Korea, Vietnam, it's a one-year tour. In some way, it mimics the standard military tour.

JW: What are some of the ways that women experienced this time overseas with and near American troops in foreign places. I imagine there's a range of responses and a range of interpretations, but maybe you can walk us through some of the trends or patterns.

KDV: For a lot of them it's their - just like a lot of the men - it's their first time away from home. They're doing this very adventurous, often very dangerous, thing in going abroad, going to a war zone. Often they get there and a lot of the women are very idealistic about what they think their work is going to be. One of the women I talk about - Emma Dixon in World War I - she gets to France, she opens her hut, and she's very idealistic. She gets up and she makes this speech to these men and she says, think of me as your sister and your mother and I'll be here for you, basically. And then in the next few pages of her diary, there are pictures of her with all these lieutenants smiling and gazing at her. Her diary says that yet another man proposed to me, they're all in love with me. She's very quickly trying to fend off the men, and I think that's a common pattern. You get a 20-something year-old single, young woman...

JW: Who is recruited to be very outgoing and cute...

KDV: And they make these men feel very welcome, and so you're supposed to really develop this camaraderie with them that borders on flirtation without crossing this invisible line in the sand. That's all fun and wonderful for like two weeks, and then they're by and large they are like, I don't ever want to see another man again. It gets old very quickly. But you can't ever say, I just need a break. Because your whole job is to be there to make these men feel like the center of the universe...

JW: That's an incredible emotional labor that's happening, and the burden you can imagine. I'm thinking about the duration of the war, even a year just seems like a really incredible weight to ask these young women to bear. Do they have any outlets for that emotional labor that they're taking on?

KDV: Not really. Not in a formal sense, no. They got R&Rs and that helped - and their friendships with each other. But there's no kind of formal way in which the military or these organizations even are kind of paying attention to them. A really horrible case in World War II - women who work with pilots learn very quickly to stop learning the men's names because they often didn't come back. The women kind of talked about that, feeling like they're supposed to be there to build these relationships with these men, but then learning very quickly that if they're going to get through their tour, they can't have those relationships.

JW: That there has to be some distance between that. How are they organized and managed when they were overseas? Who's in charge of them?

KDV: The organizations in theory. They would be sent out to their clubs or their huts but often they're the only women around. There's not a supervisor directly over them who they see every day. The supervisor may come through periodically.

JW: But they're dispersed in some cases. How many of them might be in one place? Did they at least have sort of camaraderie and friendships that could develop among the women?

KDV: Yeah, at least two people per station. That's generally across all wars as well. They wouldn't, by policy, send a woman by herself somewhere. I'm sure that happened on occasion or if somebody were transferred out or whatever, but by and large they would send two women at least to a club, or a hut, or a club mobile in World War II, or whatever the case was.

JW: When we think about the women's experience, do we have any sense of how men interpreted their presence - the presence of donut dollies or the women from the US over the clubs?

KDV: Yeah and it's all across the board. Some of the men really value that and are genuinely appreciative of these women sacrificing their time, going to the war zone, going through this experience with them. Some of the men are quite confused about what the women's purpose is there. There are women who talk about men expecting that they're there for not the moralistic reasons that they were sent there for. We have men who are genuinely confused and think that they're there as prostitutes.

JW: You could imagine how this confusion happens. That's not an incredible logical leap.

KDV: Right, and rumors start spreading. Also, part of the problem with that was that the women were given sort of pseudo-officer status in terms of their billeting. So when the organizations tried to say, well you can date officers or we prefer you date officers instead of enlisted men, then all of that class tension between officers and enlisted men, young enlisted guys think well why do the officers get to hang out with these women whose job it is primarily to be there for enlisted men. The rumor mill, it starts to spread, and there's a rumor mill across all the wars. By the Vietnam War, it's quite specific - that you could get a donut dolly for \$65 which was your combat pay. It's amazing how specific that gets, but there are, I think, some men who genuinely just thought that was the policy and approached these women who are then like, I am not here for that, that's not my job.

JW: At the same time, I also imagine that you put young people sort of in an environment together and that there are almost certainly romantic or sexual relationships that form. There's almost certainly, at the other end of the spectrum assault and rape. It's the full spectrum of human relationships that start to develop.

KDV: Right, and in the middle of this crazy environment of war, and the emotional stress, and the physical danger, and all of that, and then this hierarchy of power, just exponentially gets worse.

JW: It's an incredibly complicated arrangement that has been put in place to address one challenge but then creates layer on top of layer on top of layer of other questions. So, when we think about how these programs and relationships change over the course of the 20th century, what are the major differences or continuities between say, World War I and the Vietnam era?

KDV: In terms of continuity, I think there's the consistent hope that civilian women from home will give the boys some hope, give them something to fight for, give them an ideal of civilian life that they are supposed to fight for and then return to. I think that hope is consistent across the century. Now it starts to change a little bit, particularly as the military integrates racially. That becomes a big turning point for the military. They had had African American women in World War I. There were three, exactly three African American women in the entire war.

JW: Kara is holding up three fingers. We can count them and name them.

KDV: By World War II, they had more African-American women but still, despite the Red Cross and the USO's policy on paper that we don't segregate, in practice they do. But then once the military integrates, that introduces all of these questions about what does it mean to have predominantly white women in front of an integrated military now? And, is the military comfortable with that? Are the women comfortable with that? How are we going to recruit African-American women which was particularly difficult in the Vietnam War? And so all kinds of questions with that. And then as you integrate women, there's this hilarious moment in World War II where the army realizes that they have all of these WACs who also need to have their morale boosted and some fun.

JW: But the cute girl next door maybe isn't going to do it, not for all of them at least.

KDV: No, no. And we couldn't possibly think about that, and so they just don't know what to do with it.

JW: Is there ever any equivalent of sending civilian men? I can't think of any, right?

KDV: No, no.

JW: So there's not a hidden program that we just don't know about?

KDV: One of the most interesting things I found - so in the early Cold War, this is sort of late 40s early 50s, and maybe even the early 60s - somewhere in Germany, they decide near one of the bases that they're going to have ladies' night, because they had had the practice of having strip clubs near bases for decades, and nobody thought anything of it. And all the sudden, this club decided they're going to have ladies' night, and word got out and they shut that practice down. No more strip clubs. So there was a brief second.

JW: Just a moment. So Kara, the last chapter of your book, and we'll give the full title, it's *The Girls Next Door: Bringing the Home Front to the Front Lines*, and it's available now, people can go order it if they'd like. The last chapter is called, *No Beer, No Booze, No Babes*. This is the era of the all-volunteer force. If there are some continuities from World War I through the Vietnam War, there seems to be a pretty significant change after Vietnam with the move to the all-volunteer force as the forces are integrating women more fully into military service - it seems to be one of the major changes. But at the same time, the USO still exists, and performers still visit troops overseas. So what are the changes? What do we see happen in the era of the all-volunteer force?

KDV: Yeah, so right after the Vietnam War, programs like the Red Cross with the donut dollies, that goes away. And there are no more programs that are specifically intended to send girls from home abroad to entertain primarily a male force of young single men. That kind of program goes away. So Special Services starts to morph. It changes names like 25 times before it becomes MWR. But it starts to morph into MWR, and you see more men working in clubs, for example, instead of just the women in the blue suits and the white gloves. So you see more integration of morale work, and it kind of takes on a broader context. Morale work starts to provide for families - not just programs to keep the boys away from [inaudible].

JW: With the forces order, it's more married, the face of the forces is really changing and different. So when we think about entertainment and that, it's like you said, it's a separate piece. When I think about USO entertainment, cheerleaders and others are still really important parts of that, and still quite gendered in terms of who the audience is. What do we make of that today?

KDV: Yeah, so the USO sends everything under the sun, and it always has. And I focus on the ways in which women are used in particular, but you've also got Bob Hope who also traveled with the gold diggers who were the dance troupe, and the Miss America Pageants. But there were always men going, and there's always been this crazy mix of shows you can go see. There are ventriloquists traveling with USO in the early 21st century which blows my mind.

JW: That's fascinating.

KDV: I didn't know even they existed still. But you can see anything you want. What I find really interesting is that even in the 21st century - where you have women integrating and more and more MOSs, and now all jobs are open to women, and we're trying to integrate women and fully integrate them - you're still putting women up on stage, half-naked, doing very sexualized routines, and saying, here are some women you can look at and you could lust for those women and you can ogle them, but then these women back here are your comrades. And to me, that discrepancy is a significant problem that we can't have some women who are to be looked at and some women who were to be trusted with your life.

JW: And are off-limits in other ways.

KDV: Yeah, and so I think that problem is significant. That said, I do think the USO is getting better at that. And I think through the recent scandal with images coming out of the Al Franken tour, and people behaving inappropriately, and this whole me-too movement, I think they are paying attention to issues like this. I think it is getting better. So maybe that's a bit of optimism.

JW: But I think again this different environment, when the military looks different, when the overseas mission looks different, when deployment cycles look different, you can imagine all of those questions coming into play about what does it mean to boost morale? How do we keep morale high? What's the relationship between the home front and the warfront?

KDV: When you've got your cell phone in your hand and you can FaceTime the home front, immediately. The home front is not abroad, the home front is right in your hand.

JW: It's much easier to talk to, literally the girl next door, or your wife, or your mother, daughters. Those are all really different relationships than World War I in France, where your boys are going to be seduced by loose, French women. So if you were going to give some advice to senior military officers, military professionals, now, about how they might think or ask questions about soldier morale and welfare in deployed environments, what questions or ideas might you say are important?

KDV: No half-naked cheerleaders. That's rule number one. I seriously think that is important. I don't know. I think it's not that easy because frankly, soldiers have access to anything they could want to see.

JW: Yeah, the same electrons that let you FaceTime home.

KDV: There's an entire internet out there, and I know websites can get shut down, but hard drives are not often screened.

JW: People are creative.

KDV: Yeah, I mean people get around whatever regulations there are. So yeah, how do you get around that problem? I don't know. I think the onus is on the commanders and the people in charge to set the example and to realize that off handed comments matter, and off-handed jokes matter, and culture matters. So if you're insulting troops by calling them derogatory names for women, or if you're using sexualized humor - that matters. I think that might be the lesson, that we need to model professional behavior in all of our relationships, and if you couldn't make that same crude joke in a business office, then why are we making it in the military?

JW: So morale and professionalism of the entire force, not just of the male part of the force. And then this divide between different categorizations of women is maybe a thing to look at a little bit more closely.

KDV: Right. Yeah, we don't have a force of 19-year-old single boys anymore. It's not that. That's a component of it. We've got 19-year-old single women. We have got 45-year-old dads, and granddads, and grandmas, and aunts, and uncles in it, and all sorts of relationships. It's not as simple as just saying here's the heterosexual model of family, of community, of home front. The divide between home front and war is not quite as stark anymore, but nor is the divide between home front equals women and warfare equals man.

JW: And who serves and under what terms and what that experience looks like. Kara, thanks so much for joining me here at War Room. It's been a fascinating conversation, and good luck with promoting the book and continuing to talk about these really important issues.

KDV: Thanks for having me.