

The Battlegrounds of Everyday Life:

Balancing Motherhood and Career as a Danish Soldier's Partner

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ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic fieldwork among Danish soldiers and their families, this article focuses on soldiers' partners' experiences of military deployment. The aim is to provide an understanding of the social consequences of deployment that goes beyond the scope of a specific military culture and into the intimate world of family relations. The article argues that examining the effects of military deployment on the homefront requires attention to the local and social context in which soldiers' families live their everyday lives. In a Danish context, military deployment not only disrupts normal routines of everyday family life but causes an imbalance in the 'moral economy of home'. From the perspective of soldiers' partners, deployment challenges ideals of equal opportunity among partners outside the domestic sphere of home by preventing the women from pursuing their own careers and social engagements. Moreover, the absence of a parent challenges ideals of parenthood as a shared responsibility belonging to both parents, and consequently places the women in a precarious situation, where they continuously struggle to balance their time and social roles in and outside the home.

KEYWORDS

Soldiers' partners, family, parenthood, motherhood, military deployment, everyday life

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EVERYDAY LIFE ON STANDBY

An anticipatory murmur filled the auditorium in the old Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen. It was a cold Thursday evening in March 2015, and the large theatre was fully packed with elegantly dressed soldiers and women in cocktail dresses. Everyone was waiting for the theatre play *In Afghanistan They Shoot with Water Pistols* to begin. This evening was a special showing: only soldiers and their family members were invited to see how military deployment was experienced from the perspective of the ‘homefront’. The director and the four actors in the play were all female partners of male soldiers previously deployed to Afghanistan as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. Based on their own, and other women’s experiences, they had produced a theatre play, which promised to “present the challenges that occur when the harsh realities of war constantly threaten to reduce grass widows¹ to widows and fills the long-distance relationship with longing, anxiety and sleepless nights”. I had been invited to the event due to my newly started PhD project among Danish soldiers and their families, and I too was excited to see which burning issues I should expect to engage with during my forthcoming fieldwork.

Accompanied by theatrical music, the play began. Imitating running soldiers, four women, dressed in army green boiler suits, entered the stage in slow motion. In a humoristic tone the women set off to portray the trials and ordeals of Danish “grass widows”. Issues such as how to seduce a soldier via Skype, how to fathom incomprehensible military lingo, and how fear of missing a phone call can lead to a ‘cell phone obsession’ during deployment were just a few examples of scenes causing laughter among the audience. The play, however, also touched upon the more serious concerns of sending one’s partner to war; namely the fear that he would return with physical or psychological injuries – or worse, not return at all. How to convince one’s children that

their father will return in one piece? Or deal with the fact if he doesn’t? As promised, the main theme addressed in the play was, in fact, the constant presence and potential (fatal) consequences of war and military deployment at home. After a standing ovation from the audience applause I was, thus, left with the impression that during deployment, everyday family life is temporarily on standby until the soldier returns safe and sound.

INTRODUCTION

The theatre play described above was my first encounter as an anthropologist with military deployment and its consequences for Danish soldiers’ partners and children at home. It was an encounter which confirmed my initial assumptions of fear and anxiety as predominant feelings among the family members left behind. It likewise entrenched a dominant narrative of fear as inextricably linked to the soldier and the risks associated with his military engagement. As it turned out, however, during my year of fieldwork among Danish soldiers and their families, this narrative did not fully cover the experiences of soldiers’ partners. Fear for the soldier’s well-being did not shape their experience of military deployment. In fact, the safety of the soldiers was rarely an issue for their female partners at home. Their husbands were serving on international missions categorised as low-risk by The Danish Defence Forces. Or as one woman phrased it when asked about the risks associated with her husband’s future deployment: “Many people ask me if I’m worried, and I’m not. I don’t know if it’s because I’m not the worrying type, but I know that he is sitting behind a desk (...) you know, there is no risk really”. Furthermore, frequent contact by means of Skype or iMessage kept the families at home updated and in touch with the soldiers’ everyday lives and work situations (see Heiselberg 2017). Instead, I found that what occupied the hours and minds of the partners at home

were the challenges of combining a work-life with the everyday responsibilities of family life as a temporarily single parent. Despite different levels of education and occupation, including journalists, nurses and kindergarten teachers, the women in this study all assigned a great deal of importance and meaning to their ability to perform well, both as professionals at work and as mothers at home. When should one find the time to do laundry while managing a full-time job, and how many hours should their children spend in daycare institutions? Such typical questions, repeatedly posed by soldiers' partners throughout my fieldwork, consequently led me to focus on a different story of military deployment: one in which the ruptures, struggles and worries of military deployment reach far beyond the soldier's wellbeing and into issues of parenthood, gender and family life.

The challenges of balancing work and family life are discussed and negotiated among most working parents in the industrialised world (see e.g. Hochschild 1989; Hays 1996; Bach 2015; Ennis 2014; Harman and Cappellini 2015). However, as studies among families of sailors, offshore workers and soldiers have indicated, an everyday life occasionally disrupted by the long-term absences of one parent places a particular set of demands on the partners at home. They have to be remarkably adaptable, flexible and stable in order for family life to come together (Lewis, Porter and Shrimton 1988; Weinstein and White 1997; Thomas, Sampson and Zhao 2003). This study suggests that the continuously changing circumstances of soldiers' work have consequences, both for women's work-life and parenting practices. In this article I explore these consequences ethnographically by asking how Danish soldiers' partners experience military deployment as a recurrent circumstance, and how it affects their everyday lives as working women and mothers. And from an anthropological perspective, which ideas about parenthood

and gender are at stake when the ruptures and uncertainty following military deployment pervade the most intimate spheres of life – that of home and family?

STUDYING EVERYDAY LIFE IN A MILITARY CONTEXT

The moral (and sometimes fatal) ramifications of soldiers' work provide a specific context for the study of soldiers' families in which the mundane activities and daily struggles of everyday life at home are easily overlooked. Or as anthropologist Alexandra Hyde remarks "the effects of political violence (...) are most viscerally and visibly attached to the bodies and minds of service personnel" (Hyde 2015, 859). Over the past decades, however, attention to the effects of war and the military lifestyle on soldiers' families has increased (Segal and Harris 1993; Dale 2002, 347; Moelker and van der Kloet 2006). Within the field of psychology, reactions such as stress and trauma have been the primary focus of attention (see e.g. Figley 1998; Blaisure et al. 2012). Scholars have, for instance, examined how soldiers' traumatic experiences can affect family members to the extent that they become victims of 'secondary traumatisation' (see e.g. Dirkzwager et al. 2005; Greene and Solomon 2014). From a sociological perspective, the challenges experienced by soldiers and their families are often referred to as a work-family conflict (Bowen 1989; DeAngelis and Segal 2015) where the demands from two equally 'greedy institutions' (Segal 1986) compete for the time and energy of the soldier. Finally, researchers have focused on military family support, with the purpose of developing successful programmes or initiatives to address the specific challenges of military families (see e.g. Rohall Rosen and Durand 2000; Bartone 2015).

Consequently, when professor of social work Jesse Harris writes "just as the military is unique as an institution, so is the military

family unique” (2011, 2), he echoes a tendency within the literature on military families. The challenges of soldiers’ family members are most often explained with either reference to a specific military culture, such as the stressors of frequent relocation and long-term separation, or the physical and psychological risks of military deployment (see e.g. Dursun and Sudom 2015). However, as feminist scholars have pointed out, focusing only on those structural circumstances considered unique to the military entails a risk of ignoring the specific local and social context in which these stressors are experienced (Kohen 1982; Ross 2014; Hyde 2015). Instead, I suggest an anthropological approach which takes the social world of Danish soldiers’ families as the starting point for understanding the effects of military deployment. I do so through the ethnographic lens of everyday life. By focusing on the everyday practices and the changes occurring on the homefront during deployment, I furthermore hope this article will open up for a discussion of women’s strategies and possibilities for defining their own lives as individuals and part of a family.

The year of fieldwork on which this article is based primarily took place in the everyday surroundings of seven Danish soldiers’ families whom I followed in the course of military deployment.² In the Danish Armed Forces, ninety-five percent of all deployed soldiers are men (Lyk-Jensen and Jørgensen 2012, 10), and consequently I followed families in which the father and husband was deployed. In the initial phase of my fieldwork, I also interviewed various family members from fourteen additional families about their prior experiences with deployment. Among these families were both dual military couples, divorced couples and couples with children from other marriages. Throughout my fieldwork, I have conducted interviews with both soldiers, partners and children. During the soldiers’ absences, moreover, I participated in daily practices such as cooking, eating, playing, grocery

shopping, and picking up children from school or daycare. Mostly I attempted to gain insights into the everyday lives of the remaining partners and children in and around their homes during deployment. But, as feminist scholar Rita Felski argues (2000, 79), “every life contains an element of the ordinary”, and thus, to reach a nuanced understanding of the effects of military deployment on family life, I continually kept in contact with the soldiers and included their accounts of everyday life during deployment in my data. I reflect upon soldiers’ experiences of deployment and parenthood as moral issues elsewhere (Heiselberg forthcoming). However, in this article my primary focus is on deployment from the perspective of soldiers’ partners. The women who appear in this article have all, at certain points in time, struggled to come to terms with their family situation. During my fieldwork, I did meet partners who did not express frustration or did not find their husband’s choice of career problematic. However, they were a minority, and thus I have chosen to tell the stories of those women who fought to make everyday life come together in the absence of their husbands.

By empirically focusing on soldiers’ partners’ experiences of everyday life in and around the family home, I do not assume that the domestic sphere of home and family is the only social arena of importance in these women’s lives. Instead, I attempt to take seriously the battleground on which soldiers’ partners daily struggles unfold. When Danish soldiers leave for military deployment, they simultaneously leave their home and everyday family life to be managed by their partners alone. Regardless of the women’s work commitments, they must accommodate the new family situation – often at the expense of professional aspirations and personal convictions. In what follows, I argue that focusing on the mundane practices, routines, negotiations and challenges of everyday family life during deployment

provides insights not only into the balancing act of being a working mother and a soldiers' partner, but also about the moral landscape of parenting and family in which military deployment as a social phenomenon is embedded.

DANISH MILITARY SERVICE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILIES

In her study of Danish soldiers and their family members, anthropologist Birgitte Sørensen (2013) argues that military deployment has profound consequences for the social relations within soldiers' families. These consequences, I further argue, should be understood within a specific Danish context. Just as "Militaries (...) are national institutions", with a "geographical specificity to the ways in which they work and take effect as gendered organisations" (Duncanson and Woodward 2017, 2), so I argue that ideals of gender equality within Danish families (Bach 2015; Sjørup 2014; Lausten and Sjørup 2003) have a profound impact on soldiers' partners' experiences of military deployment.

Most Danish soldiers are deployed by the army for six months with a break of three weeks of vacation. Military airmen and sailors typically deploy more frequently, but for shorter periods of time. Almost all military deployments are unaccompanied, and when permanently employed by the Danish Defence Forces, deployment is to be expected every third year (Lyk-Jensen, Heideman and Jacobsen 2010, 20-25). However, the frequency of deployment varies and depends, among other things, on a soldier's specialisation and affiliation within the Danish Defence Forces. As opposed to, for instance, the UK or the US, where military families often live on base and soldiers' partners are expected to contribute to the military community by doing 'voluntary' welfare support (Jessup 1996; Weinstein and White 1997; Enloe 2000), Danish soldiers and their families live in

civilian neighborhoods and Danish soldiers' partners have little, if any, obligations towards the military institution. Moreover, Denmark is geographically a small country, meaning that soldiers and their families are not necessarily forced to move when, or if, the soldiers are offered/assigned further education or a new position. Altogether, the relatively stable living and working conditions, as well as a comparatively undemanding military institution, seem to provide Danish soldiers' partners with decent opportunities to be part of Danish society outside the military institution, including the Danish labour market.

Nonetheless, my study suggests that most Danish soldiers' partners do, in fact, experience their partners' job as interfering with their work commitments and opportunities to pursue personal interests outside the home. With approximately 73% of all women working either full-time (67%) or part-time (33%), working paid jobs is considered the norm for Danish women (Statistics Denmark 2011, 49; Statistics Denmark 2013, 15). In practice, Danish women still spend more hours on domestic work than their male partners, but studies show that men's participation in household chores is continuously increasing (Deding, Lausten and Andersen 2006; Bonke and Jensen 2012). Especially, men's role as fathers has developed from the traditional role of breadwinner to a point where Danish fathers spend almost as much time on childcare as their female partners (Deding, Lausten and Andersen 2006; Bonke and Esping-Andersen 2011; Bach 2015; Andersen 2016).

When asked, a majority of both soldiers and their partners in my study agreed that both parents had the same responsibilities within the family. Gender equality in relation to household chores and childcare, then, was the prevailing ideal in the families I followed. Ideals are one thing, however, and reality is often another. As sociologist Lynn Jamieson notes in her critique of Giddens, "the nature of the fit between the ideological story

and everyday relationships is not simple” (Jamieson 1999, 480). In the case of Danish soldiers’ families, deployment and soldiers’ long working hours often prevented the families from realising the ideal of gender equality. This frustrated many of the female partners I encountered, as the following excerpt from an interview with Anna, the mother of a three-year-old son and married to a captain in the Danish army, illustrates:

Anna: “I just think it’s a male ignorance thing – he doesn’t have a clue about what’s going on [at home]. He never thinks about how everything is always in order around the house – it’s magic [sarcastic tone].”

Maj: “So, in reality, the gender roles around here are very traditional?”

Anna: “Very much so, very much so. (...) It always ends up being me who makes dinner. It’s because I’m the one who is home and he’s not, and we have a little one that needs food. That’s just the way it ends up, and it’s really annoying. Just because I’m home.”

The frustration Anna voices above serves to highlight how gender equality ideals frame Danish soldiers’ partners’ reflections and attitudes towards gendered positions within the family. Military deployment not only challenged soldiers’ partners understanding of equality on the homefront, it also placed them in a difficult position in relation to their social surroundings. Like the women in Sørensen’s study, most of the partners I encountered would recall stories of being confronted with their choice to live with a soldier (Sørensen 2013, 108). Comments such as “I would never have allowed my husband to deploy” or “I don’t understand how you can live with that” from family members, friends and acquaintances suggest that the social landscape in which soldiers’ partners have to navigate during the absence of their husband is a minefield of moral judgment. Comparatively speaking, Danish soldiers’ partners may be less constrained by demands from a military institution than is

often the case in other countries. However, conflicting ideals about what constitutes a ‘good’ family life and what makes a good parent strongly influence how these women experience their own situation. So how do Danish soldiers’ partners in fact navigate this field? In the section that follows, I illustrate how military deployment interferes with everyday life and routines in the family, and how this affects the work-life and personal ambitions of the partners at home.

CAREERS AND COMPROMISES

When soldiers leave for military deployment, the routines of everyday life at home change. “I never have one minute alone”, and “I don’t know what I will do if I get sick” were typical statements from women in this study when asked to describe daily life during deployment. In order for family life to come together, everyday life was often planned down to the very minute, and the women had little, if any, of the personal “freedom” that Laila describes in the following excerpt:

“The biggest problem or the biggest challenge for me is missing him when he’s away. You know, missing your partner, missing your fellow-conspirator, the feeling of [me] always being available. I had an agreement with my parents the last time [he was deployed] that they would take the kids one weekend per month, just for me to have a little freedom. You know, I would always be on a tight leash, I could never run an errand on the way home from work, because someone depended on me at the other end. There was always something that needed to be taken care of. And if I finally hired a babysitter, it was because I had a staff meeting in the evening or something like that. There was never any Laila-time; it was on 24 hours a day, every night, doing all the lunch boxes, everything! And that is what puts the most pressure on me – not having any freedom” (Laila).

Laila was the mother of two young children and worked full-time as a pedagogue in a kindergarten. When Laila's husband, Christian, was not deployed, the couple normally shared the responsibility of household chores and child-rearing. Consequently, his absence caused Laila's workload to more or less double during the six months of deployment. As Laila's statement alludes to, however, taking care of everything at home was perceived as more than a practical burden. Professor in women's studies Helma Lutz states that as a gendered practice "domestic work is (...) always linked to intimacy and identity issues" (2007, 189). When Laila explains how she no longer has any personal "freedom", it therefore suggests that military deployment not only changes the routines of everyday family life but also her position in the family and her opportunities as an individual person. From this perspective, the domestic work carried out singlehandedly by Laila and other women during deployment is morally loaded with a social meaning reaching outside the private sphere of home and family and into questions of what kind of partner, mother, or working woman one wants to be.

The changes in everyday family life routines caused by military deployment draw attention to the balance between individual aspirations and collective needs negotiated in the private sphere of home and family. Inspired by historian E.P. Thomsen and anthropologist Mary Douglas, Orvar Löfgren introduces the concept of 'moral economy of home' to describe the social order and balance of family life. According to Löfgren, home is not only a place in which tasks and activities are planned and carried out. It is also a "site of negotiation" where "needs and longings" are balanced in decisions on who gets to do what, when and with whom (Löfgren 2014, 92). Löfgren's definition of 'the moral economy of home' is somewhat vague. However, taking seriously the notion of a *moral* economy, where family members navigate moral terrains of family obligations

and individual privileges in their everyday practices and choices, the analytical concept allows us to grasp military deployment as a moral matter influencing soldiers' partners' social positions.

Not only did military deployment change the routines of everyday family life in a way that could cause loss of personal freedom, as illustrated in the case of Laila, but the absence of a partner and co-parent could also curtail soldiers' partners' opportunities for pursuing their own careers. This was the case for Alice. As a journalist and the mother of two young girls, Alice had been forced to cut down her hours at work in order for everything to come together while her husband Poul was deployed. Poul was a captain in the Danish air force, and for the last three years he had been deployed for four months each summer. Consequently, Alice never managed to start working full-time before the next deployment required her presence at home with their children. In the following excerpt, she describes how it frustrated her that she had not yet climbed the career ladder like many of her friends:

"Well, it hurts in my feminist heart, because, you grow up being told to get an education, get a job and do something, right? And (...) I have friends who are not just satisfied with working in the same position for 25 years but who want to develop, move on. And that affects me, and I want that too, right? And then of course, 15 years later [after graduation], you don't feel like going to the reunion with the people you studied with, or whatever, and telling them, 'you know what, I write minor articles', you know. (...) That's just not something that you feel like, right?" (Alice).

In Alice's quote above, she confirms an ideal of gender equality as having the same opportunities as her husband for pursuing her own career (Gullestad 1993; Back 2015). As a Danish woman, Alice is expected to educate and provide for herself, and she

therefore struggled to come terms with how the structure of her family life has affected her possibilities “to develop”. Alice and Poul ended up divorcing a year after I completed my fieldwork. She wrote me an email stating that her husband’s frequent absences were not the only reason for their decision to part ways, but that she would “not deny the possibility that [the relationship] might have stood the test of time had [she] had a more caring and family-oriented husband”.

When the amount of time used on everyday routines and practical chores around the house ends up compromising one partner’s personal freedom or professional aspirations, as illustrated in the cases of Laila and Alice, it creates an imbalance in the moral economy of home. How soldiers’ partners responded to this imbalance varied among my informants. In Alice’s case, divorce was the final solution after years of alternately trying to accept her role and change her husband’s priorities. Laila attempted to balance the moral economy by seeking help from family members outside the immediate family. Some women talked about their husband’s “owing them” after deployment and insisted on “their turn” to focus on career or personal interests. Karen fell into this category. When asked how she felt about her husband’s job requiring so much time away from home, she responded:

“That is just the way it is and the way it always has been. That’s also why I have always been the one working part-time because I am the one who is at home with the children. I am their base, their foundation, and it has been like that for all of our marriage because he has been the one who has had all these things he needed to do away from the family. And then during those periods where I have studied, he has been told to stay at home. That was also why his latest deployment was postponed for such a long time, while I was studying to become a nurse, because I told him ‘either you are leaving and then I won’t go back to school, then I will take a year off...’ because I

can’t both study and be a full-time mother” (Karen).

After more than 15 years of being the primary caregiver and homemaker, Karen insisted on her husband postponing his deployment for her to go back to school. Karen’s example illustrates how the moral economy of home and family life is often experienced, negotiated and balanced over long periods. Löfgren argues that “the moral economy of a given home is rarely visible in grand declarations about rules, rights and duties” (Löfgren 2014, 93), but instead is “hidden in mundane situations” (*ibid.*). Building upon Löfgren’s argument, I would argue that the moral economy of home and family can also be “hidden” by its temporal elasticity. That is, the moral concerns discussed within the family are often recurring, unresolved and continuously negotiated over several years. Understanding the effects of military deployment on the social position of the remaining parent thus requires critical attention to structures which appear to have been normalised over time. When Karen, for instance, says “that is just the way it is and the way it has always been” she indicates that time has settled certain positions and gender roles in the family. Simultaneously, her insistence on going back to school suggests that although military deployment has caused personal and professional compromises, finding a fair balance in the moral economy of home is still crucial for Karen, as it was for most of the women in this study. As becomes clear in the following section, this balancing effort was further complicated by ideals of motherhood and parenthood.

PARENTHOOD – THE BALANCING WORK OF MOTHERS

In this last part of the article I explore how Danish soldiers’ partners’ experiences of deployment are linked to certain ideals of parenthood and family life. I argue that military deployment requires a constant

balancing effort from soldiers' partners – not only in relation to their professional lives, as demonstrated above, but also in relation to co-existing ideals about what constitutes a good parent. As I will demonstrate with this next ethnographic vignette, paying attention to the mundane practices and subtle interactions of everyday life exposes ideals of parenthood as simultaneously gendered and based on ideas of gender equality.

It was the spring of 2016 and six weeks after Martin's return from Iraq. It was his third deployment as a father in only five years. On previous occasions, I had interviewed Martin's wife, Trine, and spent time with his family but this was my first interview with Martin. We met in the family's apartment just after lunch. Trine was also home when I arrived. It was her day off from her work as a nurse and she had been running some errands in the morning. Now, she was briefly home to fix a few things before heading out again to pick up their two boys from daycare. I sat down by the dinner table in the living room. Trine was busy at the other end of the table making Easter eggs. Earlier that day, she had bought a bunch of decorated egg-shaped boxes which she was now stuffing with candy and wrapping in neat little fabric bags. Trine explained that the eggs were for family members as a way of saying thank you for looking after the children during Martin's deployment. "Trine has always been good at doing things like this. It's not something that I would ever think about doing", Martin added with a smile of approval as he joined us around the table. Judging by the look on Trine's face, she agreed with his statement. This was not a shared project but her idea alone. As a response, Trine explained that she did not like the feeling of being indebted. Even after she had cut down her hours at the hospital, Martin's absence had forced them to ask Trine's mother for help babysitting their boys every third weekend. It exasperated

Trine. "We didn't have children for someone else to take care of them", she told me while wrapping up the last of the Easter eggs. Later, Martin told me that he did not really consider it a problem that the boys spent time with their grandmother, and that he did not worry that his absence would affect the children in the long run, as Trine so often talked about.

The ramifications of soldiers' absences are not always observable from an outside perspective. Sometimes they reveal themselves in the almost invisible frictions of everyday family life at home. That Tuesday in Martin and Trine's living-room, I did not only learn about Martin's experiences of deployment, but also about the ways his absence had left trails in the everyday life of his family. Due to his absence, the family had to involve other family members in caring for their children. As the vignette illustrates, this was a responsibility perceived by Trine, as well as most other women in my study, to belong to the parents only. Whereas child-rearing and caring are considered a responsibility of the extended family or household in many places in the world (see e.g. Carsten 2000), social researchers have argued that in industrialised parts of the world, it is mainly perceived to be the responsibility of parents (Lee et al. 2016). Moreover, the role of parents has changed to become a set of moral practices with which one, as a parent and person, is expected to identify (Faircloth, Hoffman and Layne 2013). In a Danish context, where ideals of gender equality and involved fatherhood have gained a strong foothold, this holds true to an still greater extent, for both mothers and fathers (Bach 2015; Andersen 2016). From these perspectives, making homemade Easter eggs for family members could be viewed as an attempt by Trine to pay back her 'debts' to extended family members and, thereby restore a moral order of family life in which childcare is managed solely by parents.

Trine's gesture, however, does not only depict the ideal of parenthood as a shared

responsibility between parents. It also exposes a co-existing and gendered ideal of motherhood. The fact that it is Trine and not Martin who feels compelled to compensate for involving family members in the care-work of their children suggests a gendered understanding of parenthood where motherhood is particularly entangled in notions of presence and responsibilities of care. In the literature on motherhood and mothering, several feminist scholars have explored and identified practices termed as ‘intensive motherhood’ (Hays 1996; Crittenden 2001; Taylor, Layne and Wozniak 2004; Giles 2014). Essentially, the term ‘intensive motherhood’ refers to the gendered expectations on women to spend a considerable amount of time and energy raising and caring for their children, often at the expense of their own personal interests (Hays 1996). In her critical account of motherhood in the age of neoliberalism, anthropologist Melinda V. Giles furthermore notes that “for those mothers attempting to merge the worker and maternalist spheres through part-time labour, working from ‘home’ etc. (...), they are faced directly with the difficulties of merging two realms that have been constructed as diametrically opposed” (Giles 2004, 6). The following quote by Sally, the mother of a 12-year-old girl, Maria, and married to Ronny, a corporal in the Danish army – supports the argument that motherhood is essentially experienced as a moral obligation to sacrifice one’s own time to be there for one’s children:

“I have felt like I was a bad mother, a bad parent for putting her in a situation where she has to fear that her father could die. You know, that’s not a thing that she should worry about. And she has told me that she misses me, and that I work a lot. When he [Ronny] is finally home, well then I work, because that’s when there’s time for it. (...) And it was difficult for her when he came home and made rules for her that I hadn’t made. Then of course you miss your mother.

I have often felt guilty for not having enough time for her” (Sally).

Most of the women I encountered were experiencing feelings of guilt because of their own work responsibilities and ‘failure’ to appear as self-sacrificing mothers, as Sally’s example illustrates. On top of that, the women were simultaneously trying to compensate for the role of the missing parent. In that sense, Danish soldiers’ partners were, in practice, struggling to balance two co-existing, and to some extent mutually exclusive, ideals of what constitutes good parenthood. The following quote illustrates this unresolved tension when Alice describes how living up to certain standards becomes both her way of compensating for her husband’s absence while at the same time the cause of her experience that “things are falling apart”:

“And I know what people say: ‘Why don’t you lower your level of ambition?’ Well, you know, it’s not as easy as you say it is. I *have* to mow the lawn, I *have* to prepare food, I *have* to do the laundry. And no, I don’t iron my kitchen towels, you know, my ambitions are already lowered. (...) And sure there are certain areas where people think that I should lower my level of ambition but it’s also about making your self-image fit. (...) It’s the balance between ambition and what one should do, you know. (...) I don’t know where things are falling apart but at some point it definitely falls apart for me. So, yeah ... but it’s also because you have ambitions on behalf of your children. Not in terms of them being successful but in terms of being someone for them in a period where Poul isn’t here. Because I am the only one who can be someone for them in that period, so of course I want to take them on trips” (Alice).

Alice’ statement confirms the ideal of childcare as the moral responsibility of parents only, as well as illustrates how military deployment causes mothers to

shoulder the responsibility alone. When Alice struggles to make her “self-image fit” it is because military deployment prevents her, as well as the other women in this study, from balancing existing ideals of parenthood and gender equality with the reality of their everyday family lives. As the cases in this article have all illustrated, being a Danish soldier’s partner is indeed a balancing act, where the responsibilities of the homefront often have profound consequences for one’s possibilities as a woman, mother and individual person.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided an ethnographic account of Danish soldiers’ partners’ experiences of military deployment. I have demonstrated how military deployment changes the routines of everyday family life and thereby soldiers’ partners’ positions in and outside the family. Inspired by Orvar Löfgren’s notion of a moral economy of the home, I have discussed Danish soldiers’ partners’ possibilities for pursuing their own careers. Through ethnographic examples I have illustrated that far from accepting the limitations caused by military deployment in relation to their professional careers, the women in this study have various strategies for restoring the moral imbalance caused by their husbands’ absence. These strategies are often hidden in the mundane activities of everyday life, as Löfgren points out, and as I further argue, reveal themselves over time as recurring, unresolved and continuously negotiated moral concerns. In the last part of the article, I zoom in on the balancing work of soldiers’ partners in relation to conflicting ideals of parenthood. On the one hand, soldiers’ partners try to secure a moral order within the family where the responsibilities of parenthood are shared between two equal partners. On the other hand, the absence of the soldier drives the women at home to compensate for the missing parent by providing extra time and energy in their

social role as mothers. Consequently, the article argues that in a Danish context, where gender equality and equal responsibility in and outside the domestic sphere of home and family are dominating ideals, military deployment challenge established understandings of women’s roles within the family. However, rather than portraying these women as victims of circumstance, this article has emphasized the agency of Danish soldiers’ partner by focusing on the continuous moral negotiations taking place on the homefront.

NOTES

1. A woman whose husband is often away from home for a prolonged period of time (OxfordDictionaries.com)
2. All informants have been anonymised.

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