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‘Woke gone too far’? Emerging research on gender relations in contemporary state militaries

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From Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policies to arguments around the integration of women for operational effectiveness, military gender relations have been a hotbed for critical debates among researchers, military members and practitioners alike for decades. United States ‘Secretary for War’ Pete Hegseth recently claimed that the ‘woke military’ undermines battle readiness, cohesion and threatens military culture. On the other hand, feminist and queer scholars demonstrate the harmful consequences of the institutionalization of “femmephobia” (Connell, 2025) and the “Band of Brothers myth” (MacKenzie, 2015) in military contexts. In this panel, we move beyond the US case to compare and contrast narratives circulating in other state militaries, from Azerbaijan to Sweden, around the integration of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals to explore contemporary military gender relations. Hegseth’s comments come at a time of broader gender backlash, democratic backsliding and the rise of fascism in multiple global spaces. The implications of US policy extend beyond the national context and may influence how other militaries resist, adopt or rearticulate their own policies. We ask, how can Critical Military Studies meet an uncertain historical moment in debates of military gender relations? What can we learn from other state militaries’ anxieties, priorities and silences and from the lived experiences of vulnerable service members and those who resist service in these militaries?

We ask the the panelists to engage with the following questions:

- Which particular narratives related to gender relations do you identify in your particular research context?
- How have military gender relations in the military you study been affected or not by broader gender backlash, democratic backsliding and the rise of fascism?
- How do you navigate gender backlash and institutional barriers following it as a researcher studying these topics?

Track Classification: Critical Military Studies Working Group