

In ancient times, why were soldiers predominantly men? Is there a biological reason for this?

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I would say there is more of an evolutionary explanation as to why soldiers were predominantly men, rather than a strictly biological reason for this tendency. As others have pointed out, throughout history there have been many examples of individual females who became 'warrior women' or 'Amazons.' So it is not a question of female inability to be good soldiers. Instead, it is primarily a question of reproduction, and the biological reality that only females produce breast milk.

Keep in mind that in over 95% of our history as a species, humans lived in small hunter-gatherer foraging bands. A band usually numbered between about 20 to as much as 100 individuals, depending on local food resources. Most of the diet of foragers came from wild plants that the people gathered, but it was supplemented by meat or fish. Babies consume breast milk, typically among foragers until the child is four to five years old. So, babies and small children of necessity need to be close by to breastfeeding females. Gathering wild plants is relatively safe for small children, so women with children typically bring them along as they search for plantfoods.

On the other hand, hunting is unpredictable and dangerous work. A hunter has to sneak up on an animal and try to spear it. It would be very difficult for a hunter who is trying to carry and care for a small child at the same time. If the game hears a baby or child crying or making a sound, the animals escape. If a hunter is successful in locating prey, perhaps the hunter will have to defend himself if the animal attacks. This is dangerous for an adult, much less a child. If, on the other hand, the animal is speared but runs away in terror, the hunter has to run fast through the forest to keep from losing the wounded prey. If a hunter has to carry any extra burden, he is at a disadvantage. All of this makes hunting incompatible with the safety of small children.

Safety for children is a prime concern for foragers. Males take on the dangerous work of hunting, but females also are in danger from dying in childbirth. That balance is considered a basic fact of life, so in that context it makes no sense for females to endanger themselves further by undertaking the dangers of the hunt. Plus, females who do a lot of running typically do not produce as much breast milk. This is why females who wish to become hunters typically do not reproduce. They may be older post-menopausal women, who have ended their childbearing years. Or they may renounce sex with males, to prevent pregnancy. Many younger females who wish to become hunters will instead take a woman as a wife. These same-sex marriages allowed some females to become skilled hunters.

Chasing, spearing, battling, and chasing game is good training for becoming a warrior. Killing other humans with a spear is not much different from killing large animals with a spear. Thus, the tendency for males to become warriors grows out of the practical necessities of life in that

95% of human existence when people were foragers. Females who reproduce need to care about the fetus they are carrying during pregnancy, as well as the safety of their young children for the early years after birth. Female breastfeeding means that children must stay around lactating females. Thus, the safety of small children plus lactation are the prime reasons men hunt and women gather plants.

Traditions of warfare grow out of similar skills for hunting and confronting large animals. When humans tamed wild horses and camels to ride on, for raids on another village, or to pull chariots in battle, it made sense for males to do this work, again not because females are unable to do this work but because of the danger of large animals around children. When humans lived in small bands of less than a hundred people, and even in tribes (a collection of bands) of up to a thousand or so, they could not afford to waste the lives of reproducing females who held the milk supply for young children.

It is true that, in such small scale societies, male lives were more expendable. In a band of thirty people, for example, if several males are killed on hunts or in battle, the few surviving adult males can still impregnate adult females. However, if several females are killed in battle, that could lead to severe problems for the band, which is dependent on continuous reproduction to make sure there is always a good balance of food-producing adults to food-consuming elders. Females can reproduce only a limited number of children, and with high rates of death during childbirth being such a reality, female lives cannot be wasted. In a small band or tribe, it made sense for warfare to be conducted by males.

As human cultures evolved from foragers to agriculturalists, groups of males trained as warriors in order to defend their crops from enemies who might raid their storehouses for food. As societies became larger, these male warrior groups became highly organized as professional armies. Farming families were expected to contribute part of their crop to the army, both as protection from enemies and also as essentially extortion to support the ever-growing armed group of males. One man could impregnate several females, leading to polygyny as a common trait of agricultural societies. These plural wives, plus their young children, formed the labor group on the farm. As soon as some boys matured, they might leave to join the local warrior group, or they might be drafted into the army. Male warriors dying in battle would be less disastrous for the family structure than females dying.

Thus, what are called “traditional family values” were a creation of a particular type of farming families that emerged after the agricultural revolution. This revolution began only 10,000 years ago, and humans have adapted to such tropes since then. The period known as ‘Ancient history’ was less than 5,000 years ago. But, emotionally, humans are the product of that much longer time that we spent as hunter-gatherers in small foraging bands.

Today, it is not surprising that nation-state governments are beginning to use women in armies. We live in a world today when death during childbirth is much lower than before, and in

societies of much larger numbers of people. There is no logical reason for females to be kept out of armies, in societies that have a surplus of people. Rather than a shortage of people, which existed for most of human history, today we live in a world that is overpopulated in the extreme. It would not be surprising if governments begin to draft more young women into armed forces, as a means of reducing overpopulation. The most direct way to reduce overpopulation would be for governments to settle their differences by drafting massive armies of teenage girls (before they begin their reproductive years) armed with lethal weapons to kill each other off in battle. The winner would be determined by which side has the most survivors. Of course, such a suggestion is barbaric. A more humane means of reducing overpopulation is universal access to free birth control as well as the social encouragement of same-sex marriages.

Understanding the reasons warfare emerged as a male behavior is important in shaping our responses today. Women are no less capable as soldiers in the modern types of warfare, but it would be advantageous for such women to pair up with other females in non-reproductive same-sex relationships, or become sterilized so that if they die in battle at least they will not leave grieving children who will be traumatized for life. Social prestige for lesbians, voluntary sterilization, and birth control are much better ways to control population, rather than deaths in wars.

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