Article

All's Fair in Pandemic and War? A Gendered Analysis of Australian Coverage of Covid-19

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Abstract
The Covid-19 pandemic has repeatedly been framed by politicians and the media alike as this generation's "Great War." Metaphors are often used in political reportage as effective discursive tools to influence and persuade readers. War metaphors especially are frequently used in election campaigns, leadership spills, and during times of political unrest to portray politics as a brutal and competitive (masculine) arena. As such, the use of militaristic language and war metaphors to describe the shared challenges during a global pandemic is unsurprising. Framing the pandemic as a war can rally citizens by appealing to their sense of national and civic duty at a moment of crisis. Yet such framing is problematic as it draws on stereotyping cultural myths and values associated with war, reinforcing patriarchal understandings of bravery and service that glorify hegemonic masculinity while excluding women from the public sphere. Using a feminist critical discourse analysis, this article will examine Australian print media coverage of the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on two case studies—the prime minister and "frontline" workers—to further understand the gender bias of mainstream media. We argue that, by drawing on war metaphors in Covid-19 coverage which emphasizes protective masculinity, the media reproduce and re-enforce political and societal gender stereotypes and imbalances.

1. Introduction

When news of SARS-COV-2 landed on Australian shores on 25 January 2020, the nation was put on alert. Having just recovered from the worst bushfires in recorded history, Australians initially paid little attention to the virus and remained relatively untouched by the Covid-19 pandemic until March of that year. Culminating with national border closures on 19 March, in the span of a single week the Australian government banned gatherings of more than 500 people, implemented quarantine rules for international arrivals and forbade the disembarking of passengers from cruise ships—though Australia notoriously allowed the Ruby Princess to discharge all 2,700 passengers on that same day, which resulted in 662 Covid cases and 28 deaths (O'Sullivan et al., 2020, p. 2). As Australians began to comprehend their new reality in a post-Covid world, politicians and the media were quick to adopt the international rhetoric framing the pandemic as a war. Prime Minister Scott Morrison told Australians that "this is a once-in-100-year type event. We haven't seen this sort of thing in Australia since the end of the First World War" (Harris, 2020). Through this frame, the pandemic became our "Great War," the

virus became our "enemy," healthcare workers became "frontline" soldiers, and our heads of the state became "wartime leaders." Australians were encouraged to draw on the "ANZAC spirit" (Dore, 2020b), a coping mechanism established in the wake of the devastation and senseless slaughter brought by the First World War, particularly the Battle of Gallipoli. According to this mythology, "diggers" are first and foremost male, almost always white, brave, loyal to their mates, and willing to honourably sacrifice their lives for the nation. Like diggers past, Australians in 2020 were also expected to make sacrifices and band together—albeit socially distanced—in a national effort to defeat our common foe. Such framing is problematic, however, as it reinforces patriarchal gender norms which exclude women from the narrative. In this article, we will examine newspaper coverage published in the first six months of the pandemic, with a particular focus on how war metaphors were utilised in the respective reportage of the prime minister and "frontline" workers, to further understand the masculinist pandemic narrative.

Metaphors permeate everyday life in language, thought, and action. Conceptual metaphor theorists have shown that concepts are metaphorically structured, providing us with a familiar image to conceptualise unfamiliar phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 6). As our conceptual system is fundamental to our definition of daily realities, metaphors therefore "shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions" (Lakoff, 2004, p. xv). Metaphors are powerful discursive tools that can convey a certain idea or a specific vision of the world, and so are crucial to political rhetoric. By convincing the public to see reality a certain way, politicians are able to enact concrete policy plans and goals in line with their chosen metaphors (Bates, 2020).

War metaphors are a common discursive tool. They dramatize and often exaggerate the situation, implying a "life-or-death" emergency that requires drastic countermeasures (Musolff, 2022, p. 308). Previous research (Benzi & Novarese, 2022; Castro Seixas, 2021; Trimble, 2017) has shown that war metaphors are a powerful and widespread framing device in political discourse and reportage, used to discuss a range of issues including elections, poverty, AIDS, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. Benzi and Novarese (2022, p. 7) argue that such imagery is enthralling as it "identifies an enemy (the virus), a strategy (to 'flatten the curve,' but also to 'save the economy'), the front-line warriors (health-care personnel), the home front (people isolating at home), and the traitors and deserters (people breaking social-distancing rules)." It induces an emotive and evaluative response by connecting the fight against a virus to "nostalgia for 'heroic' historical moments in the collective cultural memory," ultimately encouraging political trust and compliance (Musolff, 2022, pp. 315–316). However, previous studies examining the use of war metaphors during the Covid-19 pandemic have discovered that such

rhetoric can result in fearful and panicked responses, fuel hatred and antagonism, trigger alienation and division, promote nationalism, legitimise authoritarianism, and is generally unhelpful during crises that call for more inclusive responses (Benzi & Novarese, 2022; Hanne, 2022). While the topic has garnered significant interdisciplinary attention leading to a considerable body of literature, few scholars have yet incorporated a gendered analysis. We argue that it is crucial to apply a gendered lens in the analysis of war metaphors as they are fundamentally patriarchal, drawing on masculinist cultural myths to reinforce hegemonic gender norms, and overlooking this only re-upholds the masculine-as-norm narrative. This article will therefore provide a more critical perspective on this field of study.

A growing number of scholars examining the media coverage of politics have drawn on gendered mediation literature to examine how this coverage reinforces gender norms and power relations. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross (1996), who first coined the term "gendered mediation," argue that the media is neither objective nor neutral but rather frames politics through a male-oriented agenda that privileges male politicians while disadvantaging women. Previous research has shown how the media emphasise masculine traits, behaviours, and stereotypes (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999), how women politicians are delegitimised in portrayals that draw on stereotypically feminine characteristics (Falk, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Trimble, 2017; Williams, 2021a) and how such an undue focus on gender, appearance, and personal life can serve to other these women from the (masculine) political norm (Ross & Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2000; Thomas & Bittner, 2017). Few gendered mediation studies, however, specifically focus on male political leaders—unless as a comparative case study to women leaders. Gidengil and Everitt (2000) and Trimble (2017, p. 154) have notably explored the use of war and sports metaphors in election coverage, with the latter arguing that such hypermasculine allegories "frame women's participation in political competition within norms of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal militarism." Rather than explore how war metaphors "other" women leaders, we offer a novel case study of the gendered mediation framework by examining how these patriarchal narratives further legitimise male political leaders, especially during times of crisis.

Framing a global health crisis and the subsequent political response through militaristic metaphors reinforces a masculinist view of both politics and society and upholds boundaries that exclude women from the public sphere. While the use of gendered language and metaphor has previously been studied in the realm of political speeches (Philip, 2009), elections (Trimble, 2017), leadership changes (Williams, 2017), and political debates (Charteris-Black, 2004), the political and cultural impact of the Covid-19 pandemic necessitates further study. Despite the burgeoning literature examining the domination of war metaphors in the pandemic, a

tendency to overlook the gendered implications of this phenomenon persists, and few scholars have adopted a gendered framework of analysis. One notable example is a gendered analysis of political cartoons' representation of healthcare workers during the Covid-19 pandemic by Domínguez and Sapiña (2022), who find that war metaphors are one of the dominant narratives, especially when drawing male doctors and healthcare workers, in addition to sports metaphors. This article will build on previous literature with the addition of a feminist critical discourse analysis of media coverage of the Australian government's pandemic response and of healthcare workers on the "frontlines." As we will explore, the use of war metaphors both universalises male narratives and serves to uphold gendered power imbalances.

2. Methods

We chose to focus our analysis on newspapers as they remain an influential source of daily news, often setting the agenda for other media (Carson & McNair, 2018; Trimble, 2017). We restricted the analysis to five mastheads (Table 1), of which three are national and two are state-based, to reflect Australia's print media landscape. We used Factiva, a digital archive, to collect a purposive sample of articles that used war metaphors and, as such, we are not claiming that this is the only metaphor used in media coverage of the pandemic. This included a mix of news, editorials, opinion pieces, and columns. We confined our search to the first six months of the pandemic (March to August 2020) and used keyword searches identified in previous research (Philip, 2009; Trimble, 2017), such as "war," "attack," "defend," "enemy," "battle," "combat," "protect," "shield," and "frontline," to highlight various militaristic metaphors. This resulted in a corpus of 62 articles, a majority of which were published by *The Australian*, a centre-right national broadsheet. Due to the format and nature of political reporting, it was not always possible to distinguish between examples where

the press initiated the use of a war metaphor and cases where they were reusing a metaphor previously used by another journalist, commentator, or even politician. This does not however lessen the impact of each example, as reusing a metaphor nevertheless remains a choice and has the same material effect in perpetuating gendered stereotypes and discourse.

We draw on Semino and Koller's (2009) gender metaphor analysis, which acknowledges how metaphors play a critical role in constructing stereotypical gender identities that advantage men and disadvantage women. They identify three key dimensions of research: gender metaphors that draw on male experiences to describe reality, reifying power asymmetries; metaphors used to refer to women and men; and metaphors used by women and men. This study is concerned with the first dimension.

To identify and interpret the gendered use of war metaphors in describing the pandemic and both political and health responses, we conducted a feminist critical discourse analysis. A feminist critical discourse analysis establishes a comparable critical examination of power and ideology in discourse as critical discourse analysis, yet does so while "guided by feminist principles and insights in theorising and analysing the seemingly innocuous yet oppressive nature of gender as an omni-relevant category in many social practices" (Lazar, 2007, p. 143). Feminist critical discourse analysis seeks to interrogate the various ways in which gendered norms and power imbalances are discursively produced and contested. This form of analysis is a suitable framework for the study of war metaphors, as it allows for interrogation not only of the actual text, but also the latent impact and reinforcement of patriarchal norms and power relations. The agenda-setting role of media organisations, especially in Australia's concentrated media landscape—papers owned by News Corp and Nine Entertainment Co. account for 82% of total print media readership (Brevini & Ward, 2021)—makes a critical analysis of the language

Table 1. Selected newspapers.

Newspaper	Type	Ownership	Location	Political Leaning	Number of Articles
The Guardian Australia	Online	Guardian Media Group	National	Centre-Left	3
The Australian	Broadsheet	News Corp	National	Conservative	33
The Sydney Morning Herald	Broadsheet	Nine Entertainment Co.	New South Wales	Centre-Left	10
The Courier Mail	Tabloid	News Corp	Queensland	Conservative	11
The Australian Financial Review	Broadsheet	Nine Entertainment Co.	National	Centre	5

Notes: News Corp newspapers have been coded "conservative" due to their endorsement of right-wing coalition governments and long-standing conservative agenda in Australia (Hobbs & McKnight, 2014; McKnight, 2003); the *The Sydney Morning Herald*, once considered centre-left (Hobbs & McKnight, 2014), has since moved further to the centre after Fairfax merged with Nine Entertainment Co., currently chaired by former Liberal treasurer Peter Costello, however, it still has a predominantly left-wing audience, though not as many as the more progressive *The Guardian Australia* (Park et al., 2021); as a financial paper, *The Australian Financial Review* is considered politically centrist.

used in crisis reporting essential to ultimately reveal its reproduction of relations of power and inequality. Moreover, the feminist nature of the research requires specifically feminist methods (Lazar, 2005).

3. "Keep Calm and Carry On": Australian Print Media's Use of Generalised War Metaphors

On 19 March 2022, as Australia began to face pandemic realities, an *Australian Financial Review* editorial (2020) argued that "the virus war is changing our way of life." The newly legislated bans on travel and indoor gatherings, the author argued, would "put much of Australian life on hold in ways unheard of since 1945" (2020). Other Australian journalists and commentators, particularly those writing for the centre-right *The Australian*, were quick to adopt war metaphors used by global political leaders in describing the onset of the pandemic (Table 2). The virus itself was frequently personified as the "enemy," which allowed the public to "comprehend a wide variety of experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 34). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), personification not only hands us a specific way to think about a novel virus and how to respond to it but also provides an intelligible understanding of why we are suffering.

Wartime imagery is compelling during periods of peacetime crisis. It effectively captures public attention and directs it onto the target problem while "the fear evoked by war metaphors also makes them memorable and enduring [which] can motivate people to pay attention, change their beliefs and take action" (Flusberg et al., 2018, p. 7). By associating a global pandemic (unfamiliar concept) with a world war (familiar concept), the Australian press prepared the population for a long and difficult period that would radically depart from the previous norm. Yet war metaphors are deeply rooted in hyper-masculine traditions and patriarchal power imbalances (Trimble, 2017, p. 32). Such rhetoric masculinises the pandemic narrative and privileges responses that embody stereotypically masculine traits, like strength, violence, authority, and rugged individualism. As a result, women are discursively excluded from the narrative despite comprising the majority of healthcare workers and teachers whose jobs place them at high risk of contracting Covid-19.

4. The Patriarchal Protector: The Wartime Prime Minister

The press coverage of then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison's pandemic response heavily drew on war metaphors, often framing him as a "wartime" prime

Table 2. Frequently used war metaphor terms.

Term	Example
Fight	Each of us has had to display a measure of endurance as well, as together we *fight* this invisible *enemy*. (Jones, 2020b)
Combat	The rhetoric of national leaders, rich with the imagery of *military combat* and calls for *national sacrifice*, suggested an explanation of sorts: the pandemic is so *monstrous* we have plunged into a new form of *world war*. (Wright, 2020)
Hunt/Kill	Coronavirus is *hunting* down every one of globalisation's core doctrines and *destroying* them. It is the virus *sent* to *kill* globalisation. (Sheridan, 2020a)
Strategy	Scott Morrison is right to insist that the states should continue *holding the line* on the nation's aggressive suppression *strategy* to deal with Covid-19. (Dore, 2020c)
War	Around the nation *war* measures will apply starting on Monday, but a *war* unlike any today's Australians have seen. (Kelly, 2020a)
Battle	The nation faces a mighty *battle* with Covid-19 and all of our resources and *personnel* must be focused on its *defeat*. (Richardson, 2020)
Sacrifice	We will win this current health war with the same endurance, courage, mateship and *sacrifice* that our brave *veterans* relied upon. (Jones, 2020b)
Courage	We have seen all sorts of *courageous* acts throughout the coronavirus battle. (Jones, 2020b)
Foe	But this is a time of contagion; governments of every hue are bending established principles to *fight* a biological *foe* that has the power to *overwhelm defences* and *destroy* our way of life. (Dore, 2020a)
Wartime	Such things can happen in *wars* and this is as close to a *wartime* situation as we're going to experience. We hope. (Carney, 2020)

Note: The authors have used italics to emphasise both the term itself and related words that add emphasis, e.g., "fight" and the related word "enemy."

minister. This trope positioned Morrison's leadership during a health crisis within the rhetorical context of war, allowing for comparison with past wartime leaders and a particular focus on the performative elements of his prime ministership. Young (2003) and Johnson (2013) have respectively theorised the ideas of "masculine protectionism" and "protective masculinity" to describe the increasing securitisation of political leadership in the post-9/11 era, in which male leaders drew on patriarchal stereotypes of protective "breadwinner" masculinity to mobilise the electorate's emotions (fear) and to wield against their political opponents. Protective masculinity is constituted through fear of a threat, real or imagined, with access to protection only gained in exchange for the positioning of the public in the subordinate role of "women and children." The adoption of masculine protectionism—either by the media or a leader—through war metaphors reinforces a patriarchal vision of crisis political leadership. Through a discursive analysis of newspaper texts, we identify how media actors compared Morrison to historic wartime prime ministers to provide an aspirational model for crisis leadership that contributes to an enduring vision of politics as a succession of "Great Men" (Williams, 2021b, p. 25).

Calls for Morrison to demonstrate his protective masculinity were most evident in a series of articles outlining the lessons to be learned from past wartime leaders. Writing for *The Australian Financial Review*, Nick Dyrenfurth (2020) billed John Curtin, who led Australia as prime minister during the Second World War, as "decisive," "courageous," and successful in "protecting the economy and shielding our most vulnerable citizens." In line with Johnson's (2013) concept of protective masculinity, Dyrenfurth (2020) highlighted these characteristics as an example to which Morrison could aspire while steering Australia through its own "war." Curtin, whose leadership was described as "resolute," remembered for his "fortitude," "stoicism," and "authority," was well-positioned as a model for Morrison, who "fittingly evoked" Curtin's legacy in his ANZAC Day speech (Edwards, 2020). Other articles were quick to compare Morrison's pandemic response to Curtin's wartime response: "In his address to the House of Representatives, the conservative leader reminded me of Labor stalwart John Curtin, who steered our country through the greater years of World War II" (Lang, 2020); and "Scott Morrison could become Australia's most important wartime leader" (Sheridan, 2020b). Through this metaphor, readers are directed to explicitly view the Covid-19 pandemic as a "war" and Morrison as an important "wartime leader" and patriarchal protector of the nation.

Comparisons to past wartime leaders did not stop at Curtin, with some columnists looking overseas for examples of Allied wartime leaders. This can largely be observed in the conservative broadsheet *The Australian*, which published numerous articles comparing Morrison's leadership to that of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill or US President Franklin D. Roosevelt. One article (Kelly, 2020c), for example, noted Morrison's "Churchillian" moment—a reference to Churchill's famous wartime speech, subsequently considered by many to be an example of "great" crisis leadership—while another writer called on Morrison to heed history's warning, arguing that Churchill had been unable to harness political success after steering his country through war and "great national trauma" (Savva, 2020). Troy Bramston (2020) wrote glowingly of a "steady" and "purposeful" Roosevelt, arguing that his leadership held many "lessons" for Morrison, charged with leading the nation through the "twin calamities" of the pandemic and attendant "economic destruction." Though most Australians alive today did not live through the Second World War, it continues to exercise a lasting cultural impact, shaping national identity and resonating with the public consciousness (Chapman & Miller, 2020). Invoking previous wartime leaders in discussions of Morrison's pandemic response fosters an anachronistic connection "designed to evoke strong emotive and evaluative responses from the readers, e.g., trust in political leadership and nostalgia for 'heroic' historical moments in the collective cultural memory" (Musolff, 2022, pp. 315–316). Furthermore, these articles also present carefully considered portraits of past leaders, highlighting qualities consistent with masculine protectionism. By calling for a return to a certain type of leader to guide the country through the pandemic, this narrative perpetuates crisis leadership as a "male preserve" (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999).

Some media voices called on Morrison to mimic the economic strategy of past wartime leaders to "protect the economy and shield our most vulnerable" (Dyrenfurth, 2020). In effect, he was tasked with meeting the traditional conception of wartime leader and patriarchal figure: strong and protective of both health and the economy. Similarly, several articles used the wartime metaphor to applaud Morrison's stimulus packages, such as the $130 billion JobKeeper scheme which allowed businesses to retain workers by paying $1,500 a fortnight to workers who stood down from employment: "Morrison has led Australia well in a time of its gravest crisis since World War II. If he succeeds, he will join a pantheon which at the moment consists only of John Curtin, a leader who got us through" (Sheridan, 2020b); and "Morrison invoked the spirit of the ANZACs when introducing bills to cushion the economic blow of the deadly coronavirus pandemic on Monday" (Caisley, 2020). By measuring Morrison's economic policy response to the pandemic against the actions of former prime ministers, newspaper columnists recast him as a "powerful wartime leader" (Sheridan, 2020b) pulling the nation together.

The last example given above also draws on the ANZAC legend, a quintessential part of the Australian narrative and collective identity. According to this mythology, on which we will further elaborate in the following section, the ANZAC "diggers" are brave, loyal to their

mates, and willing to honourably sacrifice themselves for the good of the nation. Ultimately, it is an identity embodied by the (white) Australian male. Prime ministers have often evoked this myth in the past to signify Australian identity and values, yet its populist resurgence has largely been credited to former Liberal prime minister John Howard as part of his "nationalist political project" (McDonald & Merefield, 2010, p. 192). Likewise, when both Morrison and the media invoke the ANZAC myth, it is to encourage nationalism and loyalty from Australians and to emphasise Morrison's protective role as leader. As demonstrated in previous research (Isaacs & Priesz, 2020, p. 2), this is something to be avoided in a pandemic "in favour of global cooperation."

The use of "wartime leader" metaphors was largely limited to the conservative press. While these mastheads embraced such metaphors to heroize both the situation and the leader, the few examples from the centre-left press were less emphatic. For example, Tony Wright, associate editor and contributor to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, criticises the comparisons made between the pandemic and wars, and questions why political leaders would use such language for a health emergency. Wright argues that the two are completely diametrical:

War is the ultimate act of violence between humans, requiring governments to pay vast sums to equip defence forces with the means to kill opposing armies. In the current crisis, governments are paying vast sums to give their citizens the means to save themselves by retreating behind closed doors. It is an ultimate act of welfare. (Wright, 2020)

Likewise, the wartime leader metaphor was not identified in the few *The Guardian Australia* articles included in our sample. Rather, they instead used war metaphors to personify the virus or to refer to pandemic measures (Cox, 2020; Doherty, 2020).

It is also important to note that Morrison readily adopted war metaphors, using such rhetoric in his speeches and embracing the image of a wartime leader. Just before ANZAC Day in April 2020, Morrison stated that it was his "purpose" to fight the virus on behalf of "our principles, our way of doing things…once we have overcome these threats, we will rebuild and restore whatever the battle takes from us" (Morrison, as cited in Kelly, 2020b). This would later backfire as Morrison, like his conservative counterparts in the UK and US (Hanne, 2022), failed to live up to the image he created for himself by mismanaging the vaccine rollout and supporting a neoliberal "let it rip" ethos that urged "personal responsibility" over a collective response (Williams, in press).

Through the "wartime leader" metaphor, the press framed Morrison as an era-defining prime minister and patriarchal protector, shielding the population from an "invisible enemy" (Bailey, 2020) while also protecting their livelihoods. Moreover, filtering Morrison's pandemic leadership response through a militarised lens works to reinforce politics as an exclusively masculine domain, thus situating men as the political norm (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999, p. 51; Trimble, 2017, p. 152), and discursively excludes women from the realms of "great" crisis leadership.

5. Care as Combat: Discursively Masculinising Care

The press also framed the care sector through a militarised lens, generating what we here term the "masculinisation of care." We note that these were not the only metaphors used in the media framing of workers. Domínguez and Sapiña (2022), for example, found that healthcare workers (almost always depicted as men) are portrayed as heroes, social benefactors, or arm-wrestling death. When they are drawn as women, far less frequently, they are portrayed in stereotypical nursing roles, drawn as angels, performing caregiving tasks, and even depicted in sexualised miniskirts. In our sample, we found that healthcare workers were also portrayed as heroes (often connected to war metaphors), lifesavers, or framed as commodities. However, conflict was the dominant narrative and war was the overarching metaphor.

There are numerous consequences of conceptually framing healthcare through war metaphors. First, it emotively depicts the relationship between humans and infectious disease as one of aggressive confrontation in which the virus is cast as an aggressor and patients or healthcare workers as defenders. This can demoralise the healthcare workforce, cause distress in patients, and even cause healthcare workers and patients alike to be blamed for not "fighting hard enough" if they fail to combat the disease, either in themselves or in those under their care (Castro Seixas, 2021, p. 1). Second, according to literary critic and cancer survivor Susan Sontag (1989, p. 182), "it powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatising of the ill." Third, it can result in people becoming less empathetic, reduces social bonding, and increases aggression, self-defence and territorialism, fostering nationalist—rather than internationally cooperative—approaches to the pandemic, resulting in the monopolisation of essential equipment like personal protective equipment and vaccines (Guliashvili, 2022; Hanne, 2022). Lastly, it associates healthcare—a feminised industry—with stereotypically masculine traits of strength, aggression, and protection that are not only opposite to the traits that a healthcare worker should be expected to display (who wants an aggressive and violent nurse?) but also reinforce a hierarchy of protection without care. As war metaphors are traditionally used to invoke themes of violent masculine actions performed in a distant land, while women and children are kept safe at home (Young, 2003), militarising healthcare in this way erases the central role of women healthcare workers and undermines the overarching goals of the profession—to save lives and improve the health of the population.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the press often described the work of those in nursing, aged care, and disability care in military terms. The most ubiquitous example of this has been the use of the term

"frontline worker." Although this metaphor is commonly used to describe difficult or dangerous work outside of military contexts, the word retains gendered connotations, especially when used with other traditionally masculine traits. Numerous articles in the conservative *The Australian* and *The Courier Mail* highlighted the "heroism" (Cheung, 2020; Salt, 2020), "sacrifices" (Cheung, 2020) and "courage" (Penberthy, 2020) of these workers. An editorial in *The Courier Mail*, for example, lavished praise on healthcare workers with the headline "Hail our Frontline Heroes" (Jones, 2020a), casting them as "heroes in the battle against coronavirus" and the "primary defence and attack." The author not only "salute[d]" these workers, but also used the opportunity to launch an ongoing series of "Frontline Heroes" special features. Though these examples encouraged community support for healthcare workers, the use of the term "frontline" recasts a feminised industry as effectively masculine, leaving women healthcare workers out of the picture. While one could perceive this term as opposing traditional gender hierarchies by subverting the idea of the military as an exclusively male domain, terms like "frontline" are still culturally entrenched as masculine due to their heavy associations with trench warfare in the First and Second World Wars (Musolff, 2022, p. 312). Perhaps, with further iterations linking the frontline with the care industry, this might eventually change. For now, however, by rhetorically transforming care into combat the media links heroism with masculinity, thereby implying that work is only considered important when it is associated with men.

Some commentators went to greater lengths to extend the war metaphor. Instead of using the term "frontline" as a shorthand to describe the work of those administering the important health response, several articles paired "frontline" with other war and military tropes. Aged-care workers, for example, were described as a "faceless army" "shouldering the burden" (Carruthers, 2020) and "admired heroes" who could "get us through" the "darkest days" of our generational equivalent of a war, on the "frontlines of aged care and healthcare where the battle is being won" (Cater, 2020). In *The Courier Mail*, under the headline "The 'Bad Ass' Heroes Waging War on Killer" (2020), scientist Stacey Cheung depicts a week in the life of a medical researcher developing a Covid-19 vaccine, "salut[ing]" all "frontline healthcare workers" who are "going to war with an invisible enemy" and are "the real heroes." Another *The Courier Mail* piece (Lang, 2020) highlights a need for the country to come together in support of "frontline workers" who are "risking their lives to save ours" arguing that this "war" will not be "won by individuals" but by "Team Australia." These examples highlight the rhetorical power of metaphors, which can serve to "hide relations of power and dominance," such as patriarchal gender norms (Falk, 2013). At a time when Australia's aged care system faced investigation by a royal commission, funding arrangements in the National Disability Insurance

Scheme were being slashed and nurses were in many instances not provided with adequate personal protective equipment or hazard pay, the use of gendered war metaphors superficially framed those in the care workforce as respected and admired while ignoring the systemic problems undermining their industries.

The ANZAC legend also appeared in articles using the "frontline" metaphor to reframe feminised care work as military capability. On ANZAC Day, an editorial in *The Courier Mail* titled "Legendary ANZAC Spirit Is What Will Get Us Through Crisis" (Jones, 2020b) established values associated with the "ANZAC spirit"— "endurance, courage, mateship and sacrifice"—before arguing how these would be essential for a successful Covid-19 response, positioning "frontline" "everyday heroes" in healthcare alongside defence personnel. As discussed above, these values are tied to white masculine stereotypes that play a specific role in Australian military culture and have shaped our perceived national identity. The editorial encouraged the public to hold those healthcare workers "leading from the front" in their thoughts with past and present servicemen and women, arguing that "we will win this current health war with the same endurance, courage, mateship and sacrifice that our brave veterans relied upon" (Jones, 2020b). The significance of using healthcare workers as proxies for soldiers, while writing specifically about the ANZAC spirit, reinforces a myth that both privileges masculinist perspectives of war and reinforces dominant Australian notions of nationhood, whiteness, mateship, and digger masculinity. This contrasts with the reality of a female-dominated healthcare workforce in which the majority, especially doctors, are born overseas—many from South and South-East Asia (OECD, 2020). While various feminist movements have attempted to challenge and disrupt these myths (Davies, 1996), mythologising the "ANZAC spirit" still dominates Australian culture. The use of the "frontline" worker metaphor alongside ANZAC Day celebrations cherishes traditionally masculine traits, thereby reinforcing both nationalism and gender-based power imbalances.

Militarising the care industry is ultimately damaging to both healthcare workers and patients. By implying that healthcare workers are akin to warriors, that our bodies are battlegrounds, and that medicine is a weapon, this rhetoric alters the care profession. Healthcare is ultimately committed to both beneficence and non-maleficence (Gillon, 1994) whereas war is the antithesis, characterised by violence, destruction, and mortality. As Bates (2020, p. 8) argues, healthcare workers "seek to do no harm and to heal the sick," and transforming them into soldiers "violates this orientation materially and symbolically." As hospitals thereby become warzones, it also normalises the idea that it is inevitable that workers will be caught in the crossfire (infected with Covid-19), that civilians will die, and that sacrifices must be made for the survival of the herd (Benzi & Novarese, 2022, p. 7). On 25 April 2020, ANZAC Day, *The Courier Mail* editorial

acknowledged the unsafe working conditions on these "frontlines," writing that "despite reported deficits in masks and other protective equipment, our success is a function of the efforts and sacrifices of [healthcare workers]. As a nation we owe them a lot" (Jones, 2020b). Instead of making the case for providing workers with safer conditions or hazard pay, *The Courier Mail* encouraged Australians to "spare a thought or a prayer" for the "heroes…on the frontline of the coronavirus war." As Isaacs and Priesz (2020, p. 2) ask, "in a war, heroes get medals but deserters are shot, so are those vulnerable healthcare workers who feel unable to work on the frontline and request redeployment also 'deserters'?"

6. Conclusion

The use of war metaphors in press coverage of the pandemic is not innocuous. As we have demonstrated, the media's discursive framing can impact ideas of crisis leadership and the pandemic response as well as re-uphold gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations that privilege (white) men and masculinity. Once Covid-19 arrived in Australia, the press promptly drew on war metaphors to describe the pandemic, often personifying the virus as a tangible "enemy" that we must "defeat." This extended to metaphors used in relation to the prime minister, framed as a powerful "wartime" leader who could learn lessons from the "great" Allied leaders of the Second World War. Yet such portrayal endorses qualities of a patriarchal protective masculinity, reinforcing crisis leadership as a male domain, and situating men as the political norm. Likewise, we have identified how the care economy—particularly healthcare—is masculinised by war metaphors. By discursively recasting a traditionally woman-dominated industry through the wartime concepts of heroism, courage, and sacrifice, the press not only excluded women healthcare workers but cognitively tied ideas of heroism with masculinity, implying work is only important when associated with men while ignoring systemic problems and unsafe working conditions for healthcare workers in the pandemic era. By deploying gender metaphors—like war—that draw on male experiences to describe and define pandemic reality, the press ultimately reify patriarchal ideas of politics and nationhood that privilege men and disadvantage all others.

Through this analysis, we have made several contributions that advance knowledge of the gendered mediation of the Covid-19 pandemic, offering valuable insights for international scholarship. First, we add to the burgeoning literature on war metaphors by providing a gendered analysis of their use in the pandemic, which has been largely overlooked. We argue that war metaphors are fundamentally patriarchal and find that such masculine narratives present a specific vision of the world that reinforces hegemonic gender norms in both politics and healthcare, as well as gender disparities more broadly. Second, by solely focusing on a male leader,

rather than as a counterpart for comparison, we demonstrate how the media perpetuate traditional masculinist views of politics through patriarchal metaphors that serve to further legitimise certain kinds of men, and therefore expand the gendered mediation thesis. Third, in our purposive sample, we found that the majority of articles utilising war metaphors in coverage of the pandemic were published by the conservative press, particularly *The Australian*. This reflects both the association between militarism and conservatism (Jost et al., 2007; Lakoff, 2004), as well as News Corp's history of support for war, such as the Iraq invasion and subsequent occupation (McKnight, 2010, p. 307). War metaphors were rarely mentioned in the progressive online newspaper *The Guardian Australia* while the centre-left *The Sydney Morning Herald* largely refrained from wartime leader metaphors, though occasionally drew on metaphors militarising care. It also appears that the location of the masthead (regional/national) makes little difference. Lastly, while many studies examining political leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic have focused on leaders from North America and Europe, Australia has been generally overlooked unless briefly mentioned as a "successful" example (though Power & Crosthwaite, 2022, have recently published a lexical analysis of Morrison and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's crisis communication, observing how Morrison was critiqued for his "paternalistic messaging"). It is important to analyse countries that effectively managed the pandemic—at least initially—and, by providing an Australian case study, we have demonstrated that war metaphors were common in the early pandemic period despite how well governments responded to the virus.

The Covid-19 crisis calls for responses that are collaborative rather than confrontational. War metaphors encourage nationalism while disguising social inequalities and serve to reinforce masculine norms and power relations, all of which are fundamentally detrimental to pandemic responses. It is therefore important that we replace war metaphors with conceptual analogies that convey a vision of a more kind, compassionate, care-driven, and socially equal future.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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