

How warfare shaped female psychological evolution

Evidence suggests that warfare is an ancient part of human life, dating back to when all humans lived as hunter-gatherers. Scientists who study the evolution of the human mind have paid considerable attention to the challenges that warfare posed for men and how it might have shaped male minds, but not to the effects that it might have had on women. This invites the question: What were those effects, and how might they have shaped female psychology?

An overlooked source of data on this question is the oral traditions of indigenous foraging peoples collected by explorers and anthropologists over the last few centuries. In forager groups, warfare takes the form of lethal raiding — a brief, surprise attack on a neighboring group by a coalition of males, followed by a hasty retreat to their home territory. Anthropologists have long noted that forager war narratives contain accurate descriptions of lethal raiding tactics and practices. Since our ancestors were foragers as well, these narratives are one of the best models we have of what warfare might have been like in early human groups. To date, however, no one has used them to study cross-cultural patterns in forager warfare.

One of the patterns these stories illuminate is the recurrent costs of warfare for women. Because war narratives often mention casualties, they show us multiple ways in which lethal raiding affected forager women and, by extension, our female ancestors. The catalog of casualties includes rape, torture, forced concubinage, enslavement, and death, but these are only the most obvious costs. In small-scale societies, support networks are largely kin-based. Thus, the death of a husband, father, brother, or other close kinsman in battle meant the loss of an important source of protection for a woman and her dependent children. On this last point, perhaps the most painful casualty suffered by women was the loss of offspring: Many stories recount the death or capture of children in battle.

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