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On Personal Security Issues of Soldiers from Polish Military Contingent in Iraq

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ON PERSONAL SECURITY ISSUES OF SOLDIERS FROM POLISH MILITARY CONTINGENT IN IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

Going on a mission undoubtedly constitutes a real threat to the stability of a military family. The fact of being temporarily separated, together with all the related emotional problems, seem to cause a number of dysfunctions in the partners' relations. The departure of the spouse for a mission is an important social phenomenon which creates a new situation in which the widely acknowledged patterns of family behavior do not guarantee the fulfillment of the family's needs. Hence, there is a necessity to renegotiate family roles and their scope. In the families of soldiers who go on a mission it is the wife who takes over all the duties and the responsibility for the family's general wellbeing. They have to face the dull reality: paying the bills, making renovations and bringing up children. When back home, the soldiers take over the man's responsibilities. From one moment to the next, they have to become fathers, husbands and the heads of their families again. Unfortunately, it is difficult for both spouses to cope with such a situation.

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On one of the Internet forums a soldier writes the following: *Please help me. I've just completed an alcohol abuse treatment. I'm a regular soldier diagnosed with PTSD. I've had all possible tests. I don't know what to do. I'm afraid of literally everything: going out or how my superiors will react. I feel*

anxious and frightened and I have nightmares. I also started abusing alcohol. My superiors at work can no longer put up with me. I think I'm going to talk to my commander officer tomorrow. I was in Iraq and Afghanistan. A year ago I came back to the active military service and to the world where I cannot find my place any more.

The issues of mental health connected with our soldiers' participation in missions outside the country, such as operations in Iraq, cannot be limited to the PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) symptoms. The phenomenon is much more complex and, more importantly, it should be considered in a longer perspective. Measures aimed at preventing severe trauma effects should be taken long before the mission starts and should be continued during the operation. Finally, when back in the country, the soldiers should be taken special care of. There are many reasons why implementing these steps is not easy.

We know the number of the soldiers killed in Iraq and we can quite precisely estimate how many soldiers have been injured or have suffered physical health problems. However, no one knows exactly how many of them have suffered mental health disorders. It is impossible to arrive upon the exact numbers of such injuries because they are 'wounds bleeding to the inside' which are very often kept secret and which manifest themselves only with time. That is why experts, both psychiatrists and psychologists, believe that the issue is much more complex than what is visible to the naked eye. In extreme cases there are even suggestions that this is a ticking time bomb.

From the psychological point of view, potentially any soldier can suffer a trauma and indeed the majority of soldiers taking part in dramatic events suffer psychological traumas. It does not mean, however, that everyone who has suffered a trauma, is bound to develop PTSD, namely, a kind of anxiety disorder developing as a result of some sudden, unexpected and traumatic experiences. What plays a significant role in the prevention of further shock effects is a psychological crisis intervention, that is, how fast, if at all, following the event the soldier has been taken professional psychological care of.

One of the reasons why it is difficult to obtain any statistics on trauma sufferers in the military is that consulting a doctor about this issue is still met with reluctance among soldiers. However, we do not have to look far to easily notice multiple cases of soldiers suffering from traumas. The rea-

sons for such traumas are many and they are typically rooted in the childhood as we bring our sons up by instilling in them a stereotype that 'boys don't cry'. Yet these boys are not just average boys: they are soldiers. They have to be strong, brave and invincible because it is them that are responsible for the security of our country; they are the elite. How then can they say that they cannot do it?

This "dark side of the Moon" is also reflected on Internet forums. It is thanks to their anonymity that they constitute a specific therapeutic environment. The soldiers' and their families' posts depict the phenomenon very faithfully and adequately. In one such post a soldier's wife describes her husband's emotional states and behaviors after the mission: *After some time sleepless nights have started. He would go to bed and then he would toss and turn for an hour. He fell asleep for a moment but then he sprang out of bed in an instant. He would spend the rest of the night playing some mind-numbing games on his PC. When it dawned, he would go to bed again and sleep for two or three hours. The real horror started when he got back from work. He would walk around the house and carp about everything.* When the wife asked her husband to see a psychologist, he went only to his general practitioner who gave him some sleeping pills. The soldier started to drink and when he was intoxicated he would act jealous and start a fight. He did not want to talk about anything for a long time but he finally opened and told everything to his wife and started a psychiatric treatment. Obviously, he kept it secret from the army because he was afraid of being considered a "weirdo" or "freak" and of being dismissed. Regular soldiers very often conceal their PDST as it is perceived as a simple act of cowardice.

In September 2015, the book entitled *Karabala. Raport z obrony City Hall* was published. It was written by lieutenant-colonel Grzegorz Kalić, who at the beginning of April 2004 as a reconnaissance company commander led the defense of the city hall in Karbala during the Second Gulf War. In October 2015 in an interview for the monthly periodical "Polska Zbrojna" he said the following: *I admit that it sometimes happened that a soldier refused to carry out an order and some of my people decided to come back home after only the first days of combat. I do not condemn them, though. Anyone who has ever been under gunfire for a longer time, has been a target and has looked in the death's face understands that in such a situation one can break mentally. One of the chapters is devoted to what PTSD, posttraumatic stress disorder, is and what its effects are. It can be said that I absolve the ones*

*who broke down*¹. After coming back home, many of his people led an inner struggle with themselves: a struggle much worse than the ones in the streets of Karbala. The author admits that in military families violence was not uncommon. Some soldiers sought consolation in alcohol. Many marriages broke up. It took a lot of time and effort for the families to silence the shots in the soldiers' heads. Lieutenant-colonel Grzegorz Kaliciak is still in touch with one of his subordinates who left the service a long time ago. The soldier has gone through all the above stages. Now he has come to terms with himself and has managed to settle down. Nevertheless, he has recently admitted that when he hears news on ISIS or the refugees from Arab countries it is all coming back to him and he is scared...²

It is possible to avoid such tragedies by preparing the soldiers and their families for the forthcoming mission and for all that can happen during it. Going on a mission is a challenge not only for the soldier but also for his family.

As a society little do we know about the different aspects of the lives of soldiers taking part in peacekeeping missions: our conceptions concerning this issue are most often created by the media and frequently have very little in common with the reality. It is so because of the fact that the conditions of soldiers' existence in the two different social worlds, the family and the army, are themselves complex and multifaceted.

The peculiar relationship between the family and the army stems mainly from the mutual conditioning of their functional efficiency. The processes and phenomena taking place in one sphere have a bearing on the other. According to research, the soldier's military efficiency is indeed conditioned by his family situation which in turn depends on the financial and non-financial conditions of the military profession. Both these institutions, namely the family and the army, impose strict requirements on their members. They expect them to fulfill all the commitments and require their time, energy and loyalty. It is because of these features that, following Coser, they may be called greedy institutions³. What connects the family and the army is the fact that both these institutions would like

¹ <http://www.polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/16870?t=Wojna-pozostala-w-nas-na-zawsze>, accessed 2.11.2015.

² Ibidem.

³ A. L. Coser, *Greedy Institutions; Patterns of Undivided Commitment*, New York and London 1974, p. 4.

to draw the attention and use the energy of their members to the highest possible degree as well as to involve them in their activities completely. That is why separation constitutes one of the main determinants of a military family's life. It can be perceived in three dimensions: physical (no spatial contiguity between family members), sociological (permanent, temporary or cyclic limitation of direct contacts, which influences the performance of family social roles) and psychological (the entirety of inner experiences determined by the feeling of being temporarily separated). Having taken a decision on the soldier's departure for a mission, a military family constitute a specific kind of family. From a formal point of view, they still constitute a two-parent family, yet because of the fact that one family member is absent for a longer time, they possess a number of features characteristic to a single-parent family, such as an atypical configuration of family and marriage relations, different emotional status (family atmosphere), and a disrupted process of communicating and fulfilling particular tasks. Reading thematic Internet forums, one can realize how big a challenge the soldiers' departure is for their wives. The soldiers, being aware of this fact, are also beset by the worry and concern for their families during the mission. For the forum users, the Internet is a medium which allows them to talk about their problems, to familiarize themselves with the opinions of other women who are in similar situations, to get to know some alternative ways of dealing with a particular situation, to strengthen hope, to feel part of the wider society, but most of all to get some social support which they rarely receive in their environment. One of the forum users writes the following: *I live in a military housing estate but here a family life is a kind of taboo. Although I hear my neighbors fighting, when I talk to this particular women, she pretends to be "a heroine" [a soldier's woman]*⁴.

What stems from the analysis of Internet forums is the fact that although it is difficult for women to accept their husband's decision to go on a mission, they respect it. *I truly didn't want my husband to go to Iraq. But what can I do. Each of us allows the other to follow their professional careers. Well, I just couldn't lay in the door and stop him*⁵ – writes Dagmara. Forum

⁴ *Życie z żołnierzem zawodowym* [Living with a regular soldier], Gazeta.pl discussion forum, http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,1182,130203233,,Zycie_z_zolnierzem_zawodowym_.html?v=2&cwv.x=2, accessed 10.10.2015.

⁵ *Żony żołnierzy czekają* [Soldiers' wives are waiting], Nto.pl forum, <http://www.nto.pl/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20101114/REPORTAZ/972209379>, accessed 10.10.2015.

users emphasize that the soldier's profession is difficult and onerous, and the army life is governed by substantially different relations than the ones operating in civil institutions. They claim that what is least desirable is going on a mission because it makes it impossible for the military family to carry out its fundamental functions. *Ślązaczka_2* writes the following: *The soldier's lot is tough and military families are in a more difficult position than the civil ones in which one of the spouses is away. To understand this, one has to be in young wife's shoes and feel what it is like to bring you children up away from your close family in a completely new environment and without any perspectives for pursuing a professional career. And on top of that, your husband leaves for Iraq...*⁶ There are a number of problems stemming from the spouses' temporal separation that soldiers' wives signal, yet what deserves particular attention is the media coverage from the battlefield. Internet users emphasize that the media very often focus on the negative aspects of the military service, which only increases the family's stress stemming from both temporary separation and the inability to verify the situation the close person is currently in. *Mamarta284*, a soldier's wife, writes the following: *I gave up watching TV not to get anxious but I didn't manage to avoid it anyway. It was enough that my husband didn't call the day he was supposed to and there were already those different thoughts: what happened? The lack of contact with the close one triggers anxiety: (...) I'm a soldier's wife. My husband is in Iraq right now. I've never realized how hard it is: each time he doesn't call, you get racing thoughts*⁷. To summarize, it is plausible to claim that the fact of being temporarily separated is not only the most fundamental factor influencing the nature of the family of a soldier who goes on a mission but it also determines all its other features.

As a result of the soldier's departure for a mission, the military family's emotional atmosphere is disturbed; their common experiences as well as the process of satisfying their needs and desires is also limited. Both the soldier and his family are deprived of a number of emotional needs, such as closeness, love or intimacy. The soldier also feels loneliness, the need of closeness and intimacy as well as worry for the family⁸. The analysis of

⁶ *Jak rozwodzą się żołnierze?* [How soldiers get divorced], M.interia.pl forum, <http://m.interia.pl/komentarze,nId,607819>, accessed 30.10.2015.

⁷ *Co czują żony...* [What the wives feel...], http://forum.o2.pl/temat.php?id_p=5557927&start=90, accessed 10.10.2014.

⁸ T. Rostkowska, *Małżeństwo, rodzina, praca a jakość życia* [Marriage, family, job and the quality of life], Kraków 2008.

Internet forums indicates that female forum users are greatly affected by being separated from their husbands. They try to deal with this difficult situation in various ways. Some women throw themselves into work and household duties while others try to find a new hobby or take up a sport. Women very often conceal the fact that they are going through a difficult time in order not to add to their husbands' problems. Sylwia writes the following: *It is difficult and I cry night and day. I keep trying not to show him how difficult it is for me because I don't want to add to his problems. I try to be strong but only when I talk to him*⁹. Do the women really manage to hide their emotions, though? Is it not yet another stress-generating factor for the soldier on a mission?

The fact of being temporarily separated, together with all the related emotional problems, seem to cause a number of dysfunctions in the partners' relations. Some of the most common dysfunctions discussed on Internet forums relate to love affairs, extramarital relationships (leading a double life) and marital infidelity. Obecna writes the following: *Each of us deals with being alone in her own way. It is a matter of mutual trust. It is not a rule that husbands leave and wives cheat on them or the other way round. Marriage is first and foremost about the vows you've made and each spouse realizes them one way or another*¹⁰.

Zbigniew Łątkowski, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and physiotherapist in 22nd Military Spa and Rehabilitation Hospital in Ciechocinek, who conducts psychotherapeutic sessions for veterans of missions outside the country and their families, describes the atmosphere of the soldier's coming back home to a normal life and the family in a vivid and apt way: *During a half-year separation period emotional bonds very often break. The woman has to cool down emotionally to cope with the separation period. The soldier, on the other hand, thinks completely different. And these two people meet after half a year. It is like throwing a block of ice into fire. And here comes the thought: you have someone else. He thinks that she is cheating on him. What is necessary in such moments is the ability to gradually fall in love again. But for that to happen the wife has to be aware of what her husband is going through*¹¹.

⁹ *Trudny powrót do domu* [A difficult return home], Marcin Ogdowski blog, accessed 20.10.2015.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ <http://polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleinmagazineshow/21?t=CIEMNA-STRONA-DUSZY>, accessed 30.10.2015.

Undoubtedly, military missions constitute a real threat to the stability of a military family. Research conducted by Military Bureau for Social Research [Wojskowe Biuro Badań Społecznych] confirms the negative influence of military missions on family relations. It shows that the most common negative results of soldiers' taking part in missions are divorces and marital separations. A lasting separation can also lead to a decrease in intimacy between the partners, which can result in the weakening of the emotional bond, drop in commitment, lack of concern for the partner's needs, unsatisfactory interest in the partner, lack of sharing intimate thoughts and feelings or finally gradual decline of elements which additionally hold the marriage together, such as common interests or spending time together. As a consequence of the above, one can notice a distorted process of communication between the partners, growing misunderstandings or direct conflicts, lack of mutual trust, indifference and a rise in psychological distance between the partners.

Compared to "the world of civilians", military families (including families of soldiers who go on missions) are very often in the situation of social and spatial isolation. The civilians think of them in terms of stereotypes and prejudices rather than factual knowledge or real experiences. It can stem from the incommensurability of the military and civilian realities and hence the perception of the military reality as closed and alien. What has a direct bearing on such a situation is the practice of locating army units outside cities (additionally surrounded by a fence) and physical isolation of garrisons and military housing estates, which effectively hinders communication between military and civilian population. Such a situation is highly unfavorable for the families of soldiers who go on missions. They require social support to effectively deal with stress-generating factors. Research indicates that the social support system, including friends, relatives and colleagues, can alleviate the consequences of temporal separation. It is important, however, that the process of building such support networks be carefully controlled. What is crucial for soldiers' wives is the possibility to meet with not only family and friends but also with the neighbors who can help or with other women who are in a similar situation. They should also be informed about multiple institutions which provide assistance to soldiers' wives in dealing with everyday problems. The women should also take part in military support programs concerning psychological education, coping with the uncertainty stemming from the husband's job and

getting ready for the soldier's return home. It can also turn out invaluable to have a doctor or psychologist whom one can ask for help¹². Soldiers' wives more often set up different associations and foundations but they still prefer to look for support on Internet forums or among Facebook groups. Helenka22 writes the following: *I don't feel like talking about my emotions to strangers. My girlfriends from outside the army have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about. I managed to go through my husband's mission only thanks to the Internet*¹³. Another forum user notices the following: *No other woman can understand my fear about my husband when he goes on a mission better than another soldier's wife* [Daruchaaa]¹⁴.

There are no taboo topics on Internet forums and posts concern the most difficult cases, including death. What do women most often talk about? The driving force of the forums are these women whose husbands are getting ready for the mission. They discuss many different matters from such mundane things as what to put in his backpack to really important issues, such as how to get yourself and the children mentally ready for the temporary separation. When the contingent changes, the topics on the forums change as well and they usually concern awaiting the return of the "greens" (this is how the women call their soldiers). The discussions on the forums focus on what the women will cook for "the green" when he returns home, what kind of surprise they are to prepare or where they will go on holiday. Official and toned down at first, the discussion become heated debates with time. However, the problem is that the one who returns home is not necessarily the same person who had left a few months before. All the things that he has gone through and seen become so deeply ingrained in his psyche that it sometimes takes months or even years for him to be able to enjoy surprises, delicious meals and family holidays again. It is not easy for the family to understand and accept this situation.

One of the fundamental problems stemming from being temporarily separated is the loneliness which leads to a peculiar crave for emotions

¹² K. Obuchowska, *Bezpieczeństwo państwa a bezpieczeństwo rodziny, czyli o zależnościach między zawodem oficera a rodziną* [Security of the country and security of the family. On the relations between the job of an officer and the family], [in:] *Oficerowie grup dyspozycyjnych. Socjologiczna analiza procesu bezpieczeństwa* [Dispositional groups officers. A sociological analysis of the safety process], T. Kołodziejczyk et al. (eds.), Wrocław 2008.

¹³ *Trudny powrót...* [A difficult return...], <http://zafganistanu.pl/?p=4525>, accessed 10.10.2015.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

and a distorted image of the partner. In some cases temporary separation can also trigger the process of idealizing the partner and give rise to an overwhelming feeling of loneliness which accompanies both partners. The feeling of loneliness is manifested in two different ways, namely, as emotional loneliness and social loneliness. The former is an emotional experience which can be captured by the following statement: "I feel lonely". In the case of the latter, one feels alienated in relation to who and what surrounds him or her. It is an individual subjective experience occurring as a consequence of the fact that one engages in interpersonal interactions which he or she finds insufficient and inadequate. Reading through Internet forums, one can notice that the wives of soldiers who go on missions, very often signal that they feel lonely. Kitka 12345 writes the following: *I'm in a relationship with a soldier and I feel very lonely; my husband is on a mission and I live together with my two-year-old daughter far away for my family, my sister, my friends. I've been actually living alone for 5 years in a new city and I feel horrible because I don't know anyone I could talk to*¹⁵. Fiołek, on the other hand, complains: *He's not going to be here for such a long time... I have no support in my family... Each time my husband's gone I go through some horrible time; all things at home remind me of him and then comes the feeling, the one I truly hate: it's as if someone hit me right in my chest – I think it's loneliness*¹⁶. The most difficult time for the women is the time of Christmas or Easter. Randia laments: *No one knows better what kind of help the women left back home need than other soldiers' wives. How difficult it is to spend the first Christmas alone; how paralyzing fear can be; how difficult an ordinary day can be when your husband, your friends and sometimes even your neighbors are not there*¹⁷.

When the soldier goes on a mission, his wife has to face the dull reality: paying the bills, making renovations and bringing up children. Ewa writes the following: *You have to take over all the household duties. Marek is a handyman: he checked all the equipment before leaving. Of course, everything started to break down again when he was already gone: just a natural perversity of inanimate objects. I couldn't do it without a repairman...*

¹⁵ *Samotność w małżeństwie* [Loneliness in marriage], Net kobiety.pl forum, <http://www.netkobiety.pl/t34471.html>, accessed 20.10.2015.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Trudny powrót...* [A difficult return], <http://zafganistanu.pl/?p=4525>, accessed 20.10.2015.

And she adds: *Maciek tried to provide for us in every aspect of our lives before he left; He left me a notebook where there are all the tiniest details: what and when to pay and the telephone numbers I can call anytime, day or night. I've already had my tires changed*¹⁸.

The departure of the spouse for a mission is an important social phenomenon which creates a new situation in which the widely acknowledged patterns of family behavior do not guarantee the fulfillment of the family's needs. Hence, there is a necessity to renegotiate family roles and their scope. In the families of soldiers who go on a mission it is the wife who takes over all the duties and the responsibility for the family's general wellbeing¹⁹. Women sometimes feel overburdened with all the responsibilities: *I decided to write because I'm having some "difficult time". My husband has gone to save the world again and I... I think I'll break down. It's his yet another mission and I thought it would be better but... I was wrong. It's true that the days go by very fast, work, home, my daughter's homework, some extra stuff and... you have to go to bed. But there are times when I feel I can't put up with all of this anymore. How can you live waiting for a text message, for a short call when you don't know what to say and what's more important the fact that I got a pay rise or that our daughter got 5 on biology or maybe that I managed to catch a plumber because a pipe broke in the bathroom... or maybe that there is a warning light flashing in the car? – writes iwona79*²⁰.

There is no doubt that taking part in military missions outside the country has a significant bearing on the functioning of the contemporary military family, "a sphere which is complex and difficult to comprehend"²¹. When back home, the soldiers take over the man's responsibilities. From one moment to the next, they have to become fathers, husbands and the heads of their families again. Unfortunately, it is difficult for both spouses to cope with such a situation. They cannot take up their previous roles: they need time but it is not easy to give each other time to make things normal again. The woman would like to feel that her husband is back

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ M. Segal, *The Military and the Family as Greedy Institutions*, "Armed Forces & Society", vol. 13, No 1, p. 15.

²⁰ *Mąż w Afganistanie* [My husband is in Afghanistan], Net kobiety.pl. forum, <http://www.netkobiety.pl/t30687.html>, accessed 10.10.2014.

²¹ M. Mancewicz, *Współczesna rodzina w dobie aksjologicznego kryzysu* [Contemporary family in the age of axiological crisis], [in:] W. Muszyński (ed.), *Wartości w rodzinie: ciągłość i zmiana* [Values in the family: continuity and change], Toruń 2000, p. 109.

home and that he is the anchor who can give the family a feeling of security. Being aware of his wife's expectations, the husband cannot find his place in a completely different world, the world where there is no war.

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