



Fight like a Girl: The Truth Behind How Female Marines are Trained

Kate Germano, with Kelly Kennedy. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2018.

Book Digest

Relevance: This book offers an impassioned and well-articulated first-person account of issues with how female Marine Corps recruits are trained. The perspective presented in this book is relevant to broader discussions of women’s treatment in the military, intentional and unintentional gender bias, and integration.

Discussion: In June of 2015, Lieutenant Colonel Kate Germano was relieved from command at the all-female Fourth Marine Recruit Battalion at Parris Island. She was accused by her command of toxic leadership and creating a toxic work environment. In this book, Germano contests the accusations leveled against her, dissecting her time at Fourth Battalion and analyzing the details surrounding her dismissal. Central to Germano’s defense of herself is her belief that the Marine Corps sets women up for failure by expecting less of them and that this begins at recruit training. Her solution was to set the bar higher for female Marines with the logic that new recruits would not know any differently and so would live up to these higher expectations. Germano contends that this philosophy saw many improvements in the Battalion, such as higher rifle range scores, and pushed more women through to pin on their Eagle, Globe, and Anchors. Additionally, she took measures to decrease the injury rate among recruits by, for example, instituting a yoga practice for recruits and drill instructors (DIs). The yoga also addressed another one of Germano’s chief concerns, which was that DIs were overworked and overstressed, which led to bad behavior and poor leadership.

Germano situates her efforts to improve female recruit training within the larger landscape of gender in the Marine Corps. Drawing from personal stories from her 20 years as an officer in the Corps, she contends that the double standard that positions women as different and as less capable than men pervades a woman’s time in service. She suggests that a particular facet of this double standard is what ultimately brought her down. Germano claims that her no-nonsense approach made her the target of ire from the older generation male leadership. She suggests that, had a man taken a similar approach to recruit training, he would not have been relieved from duty, and, moreover, he would have been congratulated for improving recruit training outcomes. Throughout the book, Germano stresses her love for the Corps while also expressing her frustration with the hypocrisy she sees within it.

While some might call Germano’s narrative and her account of the Corps anecdotal, social science tells us that first-person accounts are legitimates, although limited, data, valuable in providing fine-grained perspectives on larger issues. Gender bias is a difficult phenomenon to define and measure, but Germano attempts to illustrate gender bias through personal stories and reflections. In offering her perspective, Germano illustrates how the “reality” of any one situation can be experienced differently by the parties involved. For example, while some saw Germano as having a bad attitude and being a toxic leader, Germano claims she was a concerned and diligent commander. The lens through which the perspective was skewed, Germano insists, is the larger societal bias that sees women as having to be kind and agreeable. Germano’s perspective adds complexity to the stated basis of her dismissal and, when viewed from a social science perspective, illustrates the multi-dimensional nature and subjectivity of social events and phenomena.

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