

“I don’t go off to war/So they say/I’m a woman,” wrote Diane Carlson Evans, the founder of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial Project (VWMP), a grassroots organization started in 1984 to commemorate the efforts of around 11,000 women who participated in the Vietnam War (1967-1976). They were exposed to double marginalization – as Vietnam veterans they were stigmatized for their participation in a socially unpopular and controversial war, and as women, who constituted less than one per cent of the Vietnam theatre participants, they were virtually invisible in the veteran community. The VWMP defended the opinion that while women’s experience of the war was different from that of men, it was no less traumatic and no less significant, and therefore it deserved equal recognition and commemoration. By raising popular awareness that “women also served,” the organization managed to garner support from the male-dominated veteran community and the American Congress. In 1993, the Vietnam Women’s Memorial was inaugurated as part of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington DC.

This research project discusses the identity politics of the VWMP: the discursive strategies and argumentative repertoires the organization employed in order to persuade the general public that the category of an American national war hero should be extended to include the supportive and care-taking roles that women performed during the war (90% of them were nurses). Specifically, it analyzes the content of the messages communicated by the VWMP as well as the speeches of its leaders and activists: the norms, values, typologies and other mental schemas (of national war heroes, American citizenship, and womanhood) the organization referred to in depicting women’s war experience. What new ideas did the VWMP introduce into the world of the veterans? What vocabulary of emotions did it reach for when defining women’s experience of war? And, finally, how did its narratives subscribe into the overall effort to provide the Vietnam War with a socially acceptable meaning and affirm the identity and status of the Vietnam veterans?

The aim of the project is to address a lacunae in the existing body of knowledge on the memory and legacy of the Vietnam War. Alexis de Tocqueville argued that there is nothing more worthy of attention than intellectual and moral associations in America. There is, however, a paucity of research on the organizations and associations founded by veterans to represent their interests, both material and symbolic, in the American public sphere. Moreover, the majority of existing studies of Vietnam veterans focuses on men. The questions of women’s military service and war experiences remain largely unexplored, though undoubtedly they deserve scholarly attention and social respect. Using the latest, broadly discussed theories and concepts of the sociology of culture, dramaturgical sociology and sociology of emotions will allow for a better understanding of the experience of the Vietnam War and, through this, learning something new about this important part of American history, as well as providing insight into American culture.