

# Women at War

## *Debunking Gendered Arguments Against Combat Inclusions*

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### Introduction

The United States has opened all combat roles in the military to women through a groundbreaking decision made by Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter in December 2015. The historical move by the Pentagon has garnered controversial reactions among men and women speculating if women are capable or “good enough” to serve on the frontlines in the toughest combat positions (Thompson 54). The decision to transition towards a more gender-neutral military was made after lengthy research by all levels in the Army, Navy, Air Force and US Special Operations Command (Lamothe). Those in support of the inclusion of women, such as Defense Secretary Ash Carter and President Barack Obama, have emphasized that as long as women meet the required standards of service positions, they will be fully integrated in to all aspects of the Armed Forces (Lamothe). However, a variety of issues remain surrounding the gendered-masculine standards to which women will be measured against, and further, how equipped a male-dominated military is to actually meet the needs of soldiers who happen to be women.

Women have historically played important off-the-field roles in the US Armed Forces and according to Retired General Gordon R. Sullivan, Chief of Staff of the Army, 1991-1995: “They have contrib-

uted their talents, skills and courage to this endeavor for more than two centuries with an astounding record of achievement that stretches from Lexington and Concord to the Persian Gulf and beyond” (“Women in the United States Army”). Including women at all levels means a larger recruitment base and a wider range of talent and skills for frontline positions. Women make up 19% of the Air Force, 18% of the Navy, 14% of the Army, and 8% of the Marine Corps (Thompson 54). The decision to lift the combat exclusion ban may be costly and challenging for all branches of the military because it will require operational and structural changes in order to fully embrace female service members at all levels. Strong opposition to this decision stems from gendered assumptions that women lack the physical strength to perform in combat roles and the assertion that men in combat will react differently with an increased presence of women in terms of unit cohesion. Sexual assault and rape of women in combat roles raise serious concerns, both within military and amongst the general public. The securitization and militarization of women violate the deeply entrenched gender roles that have been prescribed to them. Therefore, true integration of women into the Armed Forces will require an overall shift in societal norms. The woman soldier is seen as a symbol of modernity in militaries as well as a way for women to fully grasp their rights as citizens. However, navigating through the male-dominated culture of the

military may result in a backlash against women who wish to fill traditionally male positions (Enloe, as cited by Silva 940). Furthermore, legal issues arise surrounding the possibility of drafting women. Overall, if the military is to strengthen its candidate pool and attract the best troops conceivable, it must open its top positions to the entire population. However, at what cost will gender mainstreaming in the US military occur?

This paper will examine the arguments against women's recruitment in combat roles, will attempt to expose how they are gendered and it will debunk existing assumptions. Finally, it will address the need for structural change among the US Armed Forces by examining the role of women within the military and the implications of fully incorporating women at the frontlines.

## Arguments Against Recruitment of Women

Mainstreaming women into combat units has sparked debates surrounding the realities men and women face in hostile conditions, how their interactions can affect life or death situations, and the overall success of the US military in its missions. The subject tends to invoke compelling and often emotional arguments on all sides; combat exclusion devalues and marginalizes women by denying them the chance to equally and meaningfully participate in the Armed Forces if they so choose. At the same time, putting women on the frontlines certainly endangers them and there is a wide belief that the lives of male soldiers will be threatened if a woman does not possess the physical strength or mental capacity for serving in long-term combat missions. While the assumptions based on strength and unit cohesion are important, and will be discussed in more detail, they also serve as a façade for greater underlying

fears surrounding gender-based and sexual violence in combat positions and a demasculinization of male forces.

There are indeed some physical advantages that men have over women, often in terms of height, weight, and endurance, all of which are prioritized by the military. This is apparent in the desire for taller, stronger soldiers, thus exemplifying how the physical traits emphasized by the military are persistently gendered-masculine. As a result of resonating gender binaries, women are considered physically and mentally weaker individuals while men are considered rational, superior fighters (Prividera and Howard 116). New physical fitness standards have been drafted for all military positions and will disqualify more women than men from serving on the frontlines (Thompson 54). Regarding size, female veteran Jude Eden, who served as a US Marine fighting in Iraq, has argued against combat inclusion and stated that even in the case of the most capable woman, "most of the men she'd be fireman-carrying off the battlefield will be at least 100 lbs. heavier than her with their gear on" (Eden). Furthermore, Mark Thompson stated:

"On average, men are more aggressive, which can be beneficial in combat. But that trait also contributes to more accidents and injuries, as well as suicides. Women are smaller—their stride is shorter, requiring them to march faster to cover the same terrain. And they may be more susceptible to injury: from 2001 to 2012, female troops were medically evacuated from Afghanistan at a rate 22% higher than men, even though they were formally barred from ground combat. In 2014, female troops were hospitalized 40% more often than men, even after eliminating pregnancy from the calculation" (Thompson 54).

The argument based on the physical capabilities

of women soldiers tends to minimize the advantages of a physically smaller person in combat and is based on average distributions of strength and size (Prividera and Howard 116).

Professor of Defense Analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School, Anna Simons, outlines several other issues with women in combat units that include: The possibility that intimate relationships will form as a result of mixing “healthy young men and women together in small groups for extended periods of time,” much like the workplace, and the reality that combat often consists of lengthy periods

surrounding female recruitment in combat roles. Simons defends her claims by arguing that there is no comparison between gender mainstreaming in the military and the lifting of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell because of natural “attraction between the sexes” (Simons).

Rape and sexual assault are still overwhelmingly prevalent in the US military, are extremely underreported and have escalated to the likes of an epidemic (Cernak 209). The US military has undergone major reforms over the last decade to address abuses, and yet, it is still considered unequipped to

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of inaction where “bored and frustrated” soldiers may be prone to act upon “all sorts of temptations” (Simons). This argument is commonly used to perpetuate the belief that the cohesiveness of units on the ground will suffer if women are present; there is a positive correlation between high levels of unit cohesion and unit performance and if a woman is treated differently within the unit, it can impact the success of a mission (“Unit Cohesion and the Military Mission”). The argument based on “male protection” argues that men will automatically lose self-control around women, may feel a stronger need to protect them and become more emotional when women are injured (Prividera and Howard 118). Self-control and rationality are considered masculine qualities while women are deemed irrational and emotional, especially in high-pressure situations. These essentialist assumptions are socially constructed yet remain pervasive in the discourse

deal with sexual misconduct from within. Furthermore, the military justice system is inadequate in fairly disciplining those who commit these heinous crimes (Cernak 211). “The presence of women in the military has been linked to a greater prevalence of gender discrimination in the armed forces and intra-military sexual assault” (Cernak 216). While there are certainly male victims as well, women soldiers are disproportionately impacted and less likely to report abuse, as they often must conform to the pervasive masculine environment and aggressive military culture. Women who become pregnant while serving rarely have access to abortions if they are stationed abroad (Cernak 216). The US Department of Defense is prohibited to use its facilities and funds for abortion unless a woman’s life is at risk or if a pregnancy is the result of rape or incest (US Code § 1093 and Grindlay, et al 259-264). Women soldiers often seek abortions outside of military

facilities due to stigmatization; they can receive only privately funded abortions at military facilities (Grindlay, et al 259-264). Abortions overseas where troops are often stationed can be unsafe or illegal and privately funded abortions less likely to be performed at a military facility due to a fear of being disciplined or discharged. Rape and sexual violence are used as tactics of war and women who are put on the frontlines as a result of lifting the combat exclusion ban may be raped and/or become pregnant by her fellow soldier or enemy combatants. There is little public acknowledgment among US officials of the fear that female combatants could be raped by enemy fighters. However, this is now a possibility if women are present at the frontlines.

## Debunking the Assumptions

The physical differences between men and women are clearly important, as soldiering is an extremely physical activity and training is intensive. However, this argument quickly loosens when one considers the realities of frontline operations today. Dehumanization of frontline combat on the rise and the ability of women to control war machines, drones and other combat technologies often have nothing to do with the size or physical strength. In aviation positions and in military vehicles such as tanks and submarines, smaller frames and lighter weights are actually preferred (Prividera and Howard 118). While endurance does remain important, physical fitness is often measured based on the size averages with little focus on maximums or minimums. Smaller-framed people often have the ability to move quickly and take up less space. Measuring a woman's ability to fulfill a combat role can no longer rely on traditional testing methods. This argument is based on gender biases rather than realities, as other methods exist for measuring strength, fitness, and endurance. Women have been held to

the same physical standards of men, but as previously mentioned, those standards have now been revised on a position-by-position basis and will rule out both men and women for certain positions (Thompson 54). Combat roles in the US have been traditionally closed to women, making it difficult to successfully measure women's physical performances in combat units, as they have not yet had the chance to demonstrate their abilities. However, when examining women's roles in military police units that are also physically demanding, there is no evidence that demonstrates women are incapable of performing the same functions as their male counterparts (Haring 31).

In discussing unit cohesion, one must acknowledge that there are two dimensions to cohesion: Social cohesion and task cohesion ("Unit Cohesion and the Military Mission"). While social cohesion involves creating emotional bonds, task cohesion refers to the overall ability of a group to achieve a joint goal or mission. As cited from the UC Davis psychology website on arguments in favor of Don't Ask, Don't Tell:

"Task cohesion may be more important than social cohesion in enhancing group performance. After reviewing military and civilian studies of cohesion and performance, Professor Robert MacCoun concluded that it is task cohesion — not social cohesion or group pride — that drives group performance" (MacCoun as cited in "Unit Cohesions and the Military Missions").

The repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell in 2011 raised a number of the same concerns surrounding unit cohesion, however, after five-years the argument has become null (Lamothe).

The idea that including more women into ground forces would reduce the effectiveness of a unit in battle only focuses on the social aspect of unit cohesion. If the most capable service members hold

these positions, their ability to perform their missions should theoretically not be influenced by gender. A Marine Corps study of a gender-integrated task force, cited by Thomas Gibbons-Neff in *The Washington Post*, reported a slight breakdown in unit cohesion, which occurred due to perceived unequal treatment (Gibbons). However, *The Marine Corps Times* reported on the same experiment, stating that male participants in the study had years of experience in their positions while the female participants came from non-combat units or were straight out of boot camp, proving the results unsound (Seck).

Male units are often accustomed to all-male environments, meaning it will likely take a transitional period in order to successfully integrate women. Primary studies, however, do not accurately measure how long integration will take. When comparing other countries' militaries, such as the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), which has unified women and men in combat roles for the last decade, the result is that 88% of combat roles are open to women; in examining integrated Norwegian and Canadian forces, it is revealed that there is no factual evidence proving that operational unit cohesion is affected by the inclusion of women. Further, the IDF reported that women showed exemplary skills in areas of combat (Haring 23). To be sure, cohesion is not inherently linked to commonalities such as race and gender, but it is based on shared objectives (Haring 27).

Lifting the combat exclusion ban will not undermine military performance, but the possibility of rape and sexual violence will remain prevalent for women, especially at the frontlines. This issue will need to be addressed by all branches of the US military. Intra-military rape and sexual assault cases may require examination by civilian courts instead of military tribunals. The focus, however, must be on integrating assault prevention mechanisms and gender sensitivity into all US military training, rather

than emphasizing reactionary procedures. While a cultural shift within the male-dominated security realm will remain a difficult task, the landscape of the military is slowly changing for women.

## Need for Structural Change

At its institutional core, the military is profoundly gendered and the inclusion of women in all roles will challenge traditional socially constructed gender identities. Women soldiers must navigate through a hyper-masculine environment and perform in traditionally non-feminine roles. While soldiering can be empowering for women, Cynthia Enloe argues that the military uses the language of empowerment to recruit women while continuing to emphasize differences between men and women, thus perpetuating traditional gender assumptions in civilian and military roles (Enloe, as cited by Silva 940). Noya Rimalt similarly argues that women who cross gender lines by serving in the military tend to assimilate to their hyper-masculine surroundings, therefore women's participation only enhances patriarchal conceptualizations of citizenship (Rimalt 1098-9). She states:

“...women's androcentric attitudes toward other women, or toward practices associated with women and femininity, are not unusual among women soldiers serving in non-traditional roles. These women seem to distance themselves from traditional femininity by adopting the masculine perspective and the masculine norm” (Rimalt 1098).

When women begin to fill hyper-masculine roles young men may begin to feel as if their manhood is challenged, yet it also appears that a woman's femininity is questioned and may become suppressed.

Research by the IDF suggests that Enloe's assumption is correct in that women who cross gender norms to fit into hyper-masculine environments do not necessarily advance gender equality

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(Rimalt 1117). The masculinized military culture permits conditions where sexual assault and rape occur at high rates. Assuming that women will get combat roles in 2016, fundamental changes will need to occur within the US Armed Forces in order to accommodate women soldiers. Women's health must be made a priority and the treatment of pregnancy and abortion cannot go unnoticed. These issues go beyond the US military and must be addressed culturally and politically in American society as a whole. The military is merely a reflection of the current political leadership, which severely lacks in women's representation at high levels.

## Discussion

A strong argument can be made that greater integration of women in roles traditionally reserved for men has the potential to transform male-dominated military culture, but there is a long way to go. The complexities of women's participation in the military will become apparent when combat roles open for them. Israel has gradually included women in combat roles since the late 1990s, yet the military is still largely segregated along gender lines (Rimalt 1113). Combat positions are interlinked with physical fitness and tend to highlight differences between men and women, and powerful biases against women can devalue combat positions that are gender-integrated (Rimalt 1118). However, the valuable roles that women play in group settings may outweigh persisting arguments against inclusion.

In a study cited by Colonel Ellen Haring in her piece *Women in Battle: What Women Bring to The Fight*, Carnegie Mellon and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology conducted research that concluded that a group's "collective intelligence tends to increase as the percentage of women in the group increases," and further, this is interlinked with the ability to read the emotions of others, a category in which women scored higher (Haring 28). This can significantly impact the performance of infantry units, whereas mixed-gender units may indeed be more intelligent than a unit dominated by one gender. Haring argues that gender integration will strengthen collective intelligence and would complement physical strength rather than hinder it (Haring 28).

## Conclusion

A consensus has been reached in favor of gender equality by lifting the combat exclusion ban in the US. Women are expected to integrate into frontline positions in all branches of the U.S Armed Forces in 2016. Many of the gendered arguments against the inclusion of women on the frontlines exploit physical differences in men and women; however, the deeper issue that remains is a fear of women who violate the normative gender roles that society assigns them. A cause for greater concern is how women currently serving in the US Armed Forces must navigate and adapt to the male-dominated culture of the military. While the IDF has integrated women into the armed forces, the data from Noya Rimalt's study

suggests that it remains gender segregated. More research surrounding integration must be compiled in order to adequately respond to gendered arguments against women service members.

The social construction of what it means to be a soldier is inherently gendered-masculine and it values essentialist notions of manhood. The securitization of women comes at a cost: women in combat will face higher risks than men due to disproportionate levels of violence, sexual assault and rape against women. All branches of the US military and government need to fully address sexual violence, whether by internal actors in the US military or externally by civilians. Women are entitled to their full citizenship rights and serving in combat is often interlinked with this concept. When women do get combat roles, military structures must adapt. The costs they will incur to do this, such as creating women-specific health facilities and different measurements of physical strength, are necessary. Women already play significant roles in the US Armed Forces; by opening all combat positions to them, the talent pool for recruits will drastically expand, benefitting the entire military and country.