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## Women in Combat

### Legislation and Policy, Perceptions, and the Current Operational Environment

#### Abstract

Restrictions on the roles of women in combat have a long history in the U.S. military. However, opportunities for women to serve in combat roles have increased over time, reaching a critical juncture with the recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In light of female servicemembers' success in these recent operations, the application of DoD and Service assignment policies for women – often referred to as “combat exclusion” policies – have received increased interest by Congress and other groups. This issue paper (IP) provides some historical background of the current DoD and Army assignment policies for women and discusses the confusion about their meaning and application, and identifies some of their possible impacts on women's career opportunities, mission-readiness factors like unit cohesion, and women's abilities to physically and mentally perform in combat roles. Regarding the latter, the research evidence has not shown that women lack the physical ability to perform in combat roles or that gender integration has a negative effect on unit cohesion or other readiness factors. Research has also not revealed that women are necessarily more likely than men to develop mental health problems from combat exposure. However, some research suggests that the assignment policies contribute to women's reduced career opportunities, particularly in the officer corps and more so in the Army and Marine Corps.

The roles of women in the U.S. military expanded considerably in the early 1990s such that women could serve on combatant ships and fly combat aircraft. As a result, almost all Air Force and Navy positions were opened to women. Their roles in the

Army and the Marine Corps also expanded, although women remain restricted from ground combat roles.

The current restrictions pertaining to women's roles in combat are difficult both to understand and to apply to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Confusion about the appropriate and prescribed roles for female servicemembers, along with the public concern over the capture of female servicemembers in Iraq, likely contributed to the congressional interest in women's roles in the military and the requirement for the Secretary of Defense to submit a report on the current and future implementation of DoD policy for assigning women (National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006, 2006).

This issue paper (IP) will briefly recount the background of the current policy, explain the reasons that the current policy is not clearly understood, and then discuss some possible impacts of the current policy. Because almost all Air Force and Navy roles are open to women, and because of the relatively small percentage of women in the Marine Corps, this issue paper will focus primarily on the Army.<sup>1</sup>

#### Historical Background<sup>2</sup>

Only approximately 33,000 female servicemembers served during World War I, primarily as nurses in the Army and Navy Nurse Corps, which were separate from the regular Army and Navy. More than eleven-fold that number of women served during World War II, in response to manpower shortages. These women primarily served in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) and the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) filling nursing and administrative jobs, to make men available for combat roles.

Following World War II, Congress instituted the 1948 Women's Armed Services Integration Act, which granted women permanent

status in the regular Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps, but which also limited female enlisted Army soldiers to 2 percent of the total enlisted ranks, and female officers to 10 percent of female enlisted soldiers. This same act limited the ranks women could attain and prohibited them from assignment to combat aircraft or combatant ships.

The rank and percentage restrictions were removed in 1967, but the numbers of women serving did not increase substantially until the advent of the All Volunteer Force, when women were needed to satisfy manpower requirements. Women served successfully in the ensuing years with many “firsts,” including the first female major general (1973), the first female chaplain (1973), the first Navy woman to complete flight school (1973), the first female Army helicopter pilot (1974), and the first female academy attendees (1976) (Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc., n.d.).

In 1988, a new restriction on women’s service emerged from a DoD Task Force on Women in the Military. Responding to a request from Congress, it created the “risk rule” that states “risks of exposure to direct combat, hostile fire, or capture are proper criteria for closing noncombat positions or units to women, providing that the type, degree, and duration of such risks are equal to or greater than that experienced by combat units in the same theater of operations.” This rule effectively permitted assignments to be closed to women based on factors other than the missions of those units; women could now be excluded based on the context in which those units were likely to perform those missions. The risk rule was rescinded in January 1994 by the same memorandum signed by Les Aspin that conveys the current DoD policy. The DoD perspective, based on experience with Operation Desert Storm, was that everyone in theater was at risk, and thus a risk-based policy was no longer appropriate (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1998).

### **The Current Assignment Policy for Military Women**

There are multiple assignment policies. There is a DoD assignment policy (Aspin, 1994), mentioned above, which states:

“Service members are eligible to be assigned to all positions for which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground...”

The Services also have their own assignment policies. Because the Service policies must provide implementation details beyond that contained in the DoD policy, the Service policies include more than such “simple” statements. One complicating factor is that the Army assignment policy predates the DoD policy.<sup>3</sup> The 1992 Army policy was not rewritten after the change in the DoD policy, and the combat

environment in Iraq and Afghanistan has highlighted key differences between the two policies.

One difference between the two policies pertains to their definitions of combat. The DoD policy defines “direct ground combat” as “Engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force’s personnel.” The DoD policy states further, “[d]irect ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, or shock effect” (Aspin, 1994). The Army policy defines “direct combat” as “[e]ngaging an enemy with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to direct enemy fire, a high probability of direct physical contact with the enemy’s personnel and a substantial risk of capture. Direct combat takes place while closing with the enemy by fire, maneuver, and shock effect in order to destroy or capture the enemy, or while repelling the enemy’s assault by fire, close combat, or counterattack” (U.S. Department of the Army, 1992, p. 5). Thus, the Army policy adds the requirement for “substantial risk of capture” to the definition. The other key difference is that the Army definition includes the aspect of repelling assault. This becomes especially important because another key difference between the two policies is that the DoD policy prohibits “assignment to units below the brigade level whose *primary* mission” is direct ground combat (Aspin, 1994). The Army policy, however, prohibits assignment to such sized units whose “*routine* mission [is] to engage in direct combat” (U.S. Department of the Army, 1992, p. 1). The operations in Iraq highlight the differences between these policies, as there have been military units that have *routinely* participated in combat, although combat was not their *primary* mission. This is, for example, the experience of supply units whose passage along convoy routes was routinely subject to attack. If such a situation could be considered repelling the enemy, then those units *routinely* participated in direct combat, even though their *primary* mission was supply-related.

Another difference between the DoD policy and the Army policy pertains to collocation, a restriction contained only within the Army assignment policy.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the Army policy prohibits assignment of women to units “which collocate routinely with units assigned a direct combat mission” (U.S. Department of the Army, 1992, p. 5). While some experts have maintained that units must be interdependent upon one another to be considered collocated, the Army policy defines collocation as occurring when a unit “physically locates and remains” with another.

Besides these key differences between the policies, it is also worthwhile to mention problematic vocabulary of both policies, given that concepts such as “enemy,” “exposed to hostile fire,” “forward,” and “well-forward” are no longer useful when determining which units should be closed to

military women. The enemy is no longer clearly and consistently identifiable, and all units are essentially exposed to hostile fire. Additionally, the spatial concepts of forward and well-forward are inappropriate and lacking to convey the complexity of operations such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**The Assignment Policy Is Not an Employment Policy**

One important aspect about women’s roles in the military is that DoD (and each of the Services) has an *assignment* policy, not an *employment* policy. In other words, given the female servicemember is trained in an occupation, the assignment policy determines to which unit that servicemember can be assigned to perform her trained job. In sum, the assignment policy does not curtail what women can do, but only the units to which women can be assigned. There are also occupational specialties closed to women. The interaction between occupational specialties open or closed to women and the units open or closed to women is shown below in Table 1. The columns indicate whether the occupation is open or closed to women, and the rows indicate whether the unit is open or closed to female assignments. For example, there are traditionally female jobs that are open to women in traditionally female units such as nurses that work in military hospitals. But there are also women serving in slightly less-traditional occupations such as supply. A female supply sergeant could be assigned to a supply unit such as an Army combat sustainment support battalion. But that same female servicemember could not be assigned to an infantry battalion. There are also occupational specialties such as infantry that are closed to women. Positions requiring this occupational specialty are closed to women regardless of the unit.

Once a female servicemember has been validly assigned to a unit, the assignment policy does not prescribe what duties she can perform. The local commander has the authority to use personnel to fulfill the unit mission.<sup>5</sup> For example, Harrell et al.’s study (2007) found examples of female servicemembers trained as cooks having received the Combat Action Badge in Iraq, likely because contractor cooks obviated the need for U.S. soldiers to cook. Instead these women, along with their male colleagues trained as cooks, were performing other duties such as guard duty that placed them in greater danger.

The assignment policy does not limit the units with which female servicemembers can interact. There were instances in Iraq in which individuals or small units were *attached* to other units. This is different from assignment

and is not prohibited by the assignment policy. The Army forward support company (FSC) provides an example of women serving in a unit that was attached to maneuver battalions. The FSCs were assigned to the Brigade Support Battalion (BSB) but the BSB was often hours away and only infrequently in contact with the FSC. Personnel serving in FSCs and maneuver battalions spoke very positively of the interaction and the performance of all servicemembers involved. However, the practice of attaching these units was likely part of the motivation for a congressionally-mandated assessment of Army assignment policies in Iraq.

**Attitudes Regarding Gender Policies**

The U.S. military depends upon female servicemembers to satisfy military requirements. The performance of female servicemembers is frequently applauded, and is recognized with awards (McSally, 2007).<sup>6</sup> Servicemembers and commanders returning from Iraq, when questioned about the assignment policy, consistently informed researchers that both male and female servicemembers had performed well during deployment. Nonetheless, challenges to the assignment policy and the prescribed roles of military women remain.

Those who argue against expanded roles for military women mention several issues. One issue is an expected negative effect upon cohesion and mission effectiveness. Neither research nor practical experience has supported this concern (Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services [DACOWITS], 2009; Harrell & Miller, 1997). Another argument is that women in combat impede mission effectiveness because they cannot handle the same equipment or tolerate the same physical stress as men. Indeed, women get the same training and must meet generally the same health standards and qualifications as men, although sometimes the physical requirements differ. For example, the Army Physical Fitness Test, which consists of push-ups, sit-ups, and a two-mile run, uses the same scale to score sit-ups for both genders, with an easier scale for females in push-ups and the run (APFT-standards.com, 2010). According to one female soldier, however, varying fitness expectations “automatically sets women soldiers apart and makes us appear less capable than men” (Ross, 2010). When it comes to arguments about carrying equipment or even wounded soldiers, some argue that inability may be more a function of size than gender, and that the capabilities of smaller men and larger women overlap. Ultimately, there is a lack of empirical data on female fitness and correlation with battle performance other than basic physical requirements by the Services.

**Table 1. Examples of Occupational Specialties and Units Open or Closed to Women in the Army.**

	Occupation Open to Women	Occupation Closed to Women
Unit Open to Women	Nurse in hospital; supply sergeant in combat sustainment support battalion	Infantry instructor at schoolhouse at Ft. Benning
Unit Closed to Women	Supply sergeant in infantry battalion	Infantry soldier in infantry battalion

A related contention suggests that women cannot deal with the emotional ramifications of combat as well as men (Cave, 2009). However, the limited published studies on gender differences in mental health impacts of combat exposure suggest the evidence is mixed; some research shows slightly more negative impacts for women but other research finds no gender differences (Street, Vogt, & Dutra, 2009). Furthermore, DoD officials noted that initial studies of veterans with similar time outside secure bases in Iraq revealed increased mental health issues for males and females in nearly the same proportion (Cave, 2009). Taken together, the existing evidence does not support the claim that women are necessarily less equipped than men to handle the stress of combat.

### Impact on Careers of Female Servicemembers

The military gender policies are perceived to limit career opportunities for female servicemembers, especially officers and evidence suggests that these perceptions have some basis. First, data show a link between tactical – including direct combat – career fields and senior leadership and a link between tactical career fields and gender. Specifically, based on December 2008 DMDC data, a majority (over 65 percent) of flag/general officers in the four DoD Services came from tactical career fields. This percentage also increases with flag/general rank: About 65 percent of O-7 officers, over 70 percent of O-8 officers, over 70 percent of O-9 officers, and over 77 percent of O-10 officers came from tactical backgrounds. At the same time, just 11 percent of active-component female officers were in tactical occupations compared to about 41 percent of active-component male officers. (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010). Combined, these patterns suggest that the combat exclusion policies either prohibit or discourage women from serving in the career fields that provide the greatest opportunities to reach senior leadership ranks in the officer corps.

Although the evidence about tactical career backgrounds suggests a direct link between female officers' advancement opportunities and barriers to combat-related career fields, prior studies on female officers' promotion rates suggest that the relationship is more complex. For example, Hosek et al., (2001) found that white female officers were less likely to reach higher ranks, but this is generally because they chose to leave the military between promotions. Black female officers (and black male officers) were more likely to fail promotions, as compared to white males. Nonetheless, the same study also offered additional insights suggesting that limited occupational opportunities and inconsistent acceptance of their role in and contribution to the military negatively affect their military careers.

When asked about the combat exclusion policy, the majority of male personnel in the Army and Marine Corps felt that gender exclusions should remain, and the percent in agreement increased with rank (Harrell & Miller, 1997). However, the story from female respondents was more complex. Relatively small proportions were satisfied with the current exclusion (10–21 percent). However, the proposed

revision varied considerably by rank. Junior NCOs and junior enlisted women were more likely to indicate that women should be able to volunteer for combat arms occupations (55 and 71 percent, respectively). Female senior NCOs and female officers were more likely to be divided between whether women should be able to volunteer, or whether women should be assigned to combat arms just like male servicemembers. This suggests that those women who have committed to military service as a career are more likely to appreciate the career implications of being treated differently from their male counterparts. This is more an issue for the Army and the Marine Corps than for the Navy and Air Force for two reasons. First, the percentage of positions closed (either because the occupation is closed or because the unit is closed) in the Navy and Air Force are very small. Second, the centrality of those closed assignments to the core mission of the military Service is much less than for the Army and the Marine Corps. Being ineligible for Navy SEALs likely does not make a female sailor “less Navy.” However, being ineligible for infantry may be perceived to make a female soldier “less Army.”

### Conclusions

Assignment policies for women in the U.S. military – particularly those from DoD and the Army – have come under increased scrutiny with the recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This IP outlined some of the history behind the current policies and how there has been confusion about their meaning and application. In particular, this IP showed evidence that

- Army and DoD assignment policies differ in important ways, with Army policy predating the DoD policy and being more restrictive regarding the units to which women can be assigned.
- Confusion exists about the line between assignment and employment of women in the operational theater, largely because women have performed in roles that could be considered combat-related although they were not formally assigned to combat units per the assignment policy.
- Service and rank contribute to servicemembers' perceptions as to whether women should be allowed to serve in direct ground combat roles.

This IP also identified research on the possible impacts of the assignment policies on women's career opportunities, mission-readiness factors like unit cohesion, and women's abilities to physically and mentally perform in combat roles. Research evidence has *not* shown that women lack the physical ability to perform in combat roles or that gender integration has a negative effect on unit cohesion or other readiness factors. Research has also not revealed that women are necessarily more likely than men to develop mental health problems from combat exposure. However, some research suggests that the assignment policies contribute to women's reduced career opportunities, particularly in the officer corps and more so in the Army and Marine Corps.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Additionally, the Marine Corps guidance on roles for women does not have the same complicating factors as will be discussed for the Army guidance.

<sup>2</sup>Some of this material is excerpted and revised from Harrell and Miller (1997). For a more complete history of women in the military, see Holm (1992).

<sup>3</sup>See Harrell et al. (2007) for a more detailed discussion of the differences between the policies and an assessment of whether the Army followed the policy during the conflict in Iraq.

<sup>4</sup>The DoD policy mentions collocation, but not as a restriction.

<sup>5</sup>For example, the Army assignment policy states: "Once properly assigned, female soldiers are subject to the same utilization policies as their male counterparts. In event of hostilities, female soldiers will remain with their assigned units and continue to perform their assigned duties" (U.S. Department of the Army, 1992, p. 2).

<sup>6</sup>McSally (2007, p. 1017) cites an interview with Army G1 staff to report that, "As of December 18, 2006, the Army had awarded women warriors one Silver Star, seven Bronze Stars with Valor, thirteen Air Medals with Valor, and sixty-eight Army Commendation medals with Valor."

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