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## ***Women in Combat*** ***The Facts***

Women have fought in the United States military in every major conflict from the American Revolution through the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite their legal exclusion from direct ground combat, American women are indisputably participating in ground combat roles, participation which is recognized as imperative for mission success. Iraq and Afghanistan exemplify asymmetric battlefields, where the potential for engagement in direct ground combat is ever present. The lack of clear front lines combined with the tactical need for U.S. women to engage with Afghan and Iraqi women place U.S. servicewomen in positions where combat is inevitable. The disconnect between what the U.S. government and military *says* women are allowed to do and what they are *actually* doing is not only a blatant act of gender discrimination, it fosters a hostile work environment where women's capabilities are assumed rather than assessed. SWAN supports the Military Leadership Diversity Commission (MLDC) in their finding that the most effective military is one where women are fully integrated in all sectors of the military. Servicewomen who have participated in combat deserve validation and recognition; so long as the ban remains they will continue to be denied the symbolic and material rewards of combat veterans. Simply put, the military proclaims itself to be a bastion of equal rights yet continues to discriminate against women. Repealing the combat exclusion ban is a necessary step for full gender equality and equal opportunity.

### **Women in the Military: Participation and Exclusion**

- As of 2010, 213,823 active-duty servicewomen comprise 14.5% of the total active force of 1.47 million, nearly 20% of the reserve force,<sup>1</sup> and 20% of new recruits.<sup>2</sup>
- More than 130 women have died in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).<sup>3</sup>
- Women are excluded from nine percent of all Army roles, or 30 percent of active-duty positions. 38 percent of positions in the Marine Corps are closed to women.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2009, women comprised only 20.6 percent of active component officer gain and 16.2 percent of the active component officer force.<sup>5</sup>
- Despite women's legal exclusion from combat, two servicewomen have been awarded the Silver Star, the military's third-highest medal for valor in combat.
- Women make up 11.4 percent of OEF and OIF veterans.<sup>6</sup>
- In comparison to their representation in ranks E-1 through E-6, women are underrepresented among senior noncommissioned officers and flag/general officers across all Services.<sup>7</sup>

## **Military Policies: Contradictions and Ambiguities**

Currently, two policies are used to determine women's positioning in the military: the 1992 Army policy (AR 600-13) and the 1994 DoD policy, both which contain ambiguous language and often contradict one another. Three primary points of contradiction, which render the policies unintelligible and moot, are: 1) the contradiction between "routine" and "primary" missions; 2) the definitions of and restrictions on "collocation" 3) the definitions of "direct combat."

### **Routine vs. Primary Missions**

The Clinton Administration's 1994 Assignment policy states that women can "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."<sup>8</sup> In this policy, women are excluded from units whose *primary* mission is direct ground combat, which differs from Army policy, which states that women can't be assigned to units that have a *routine* mission of direct combat.<sup>9</sup> While the distinction between "routine" and "primary" is important, both policies disregard the fact that modern combat occurs regardless of a unit's official assignment.

### **Collocation**

The restriction on and definition of collocation also differs between policies: while the Army prohibits women from being assigned to positions or units that *regularly* collocate with units assigned a direct combat mission, the DoD policy states that women may be restricted "where units and positions are *doctrinally* required to physically collocate and remain with direct ground combat units that are closed to women."<sup>10</sup> The RAND report points out that it is unclear whether "collocate" refers to physical proximity of units or unit interdependence, or both, which makes it impossible to evaluate whether the policy is actually being adhered to or not.<sup>11</sup>

### **Direct Combat**

The Army and DoD definitions of "direct combat" offer another instance of contradictory interpretation. The Army policy includes "a substantial risk of capture" as being definitional while the DoD does not. The DoD defines direct combat as taking "place *well forward* on the battlefield while locating and closing with the enemy" while the Army policy omits the phrase "well forward on the battlefield" but adds that combat occurs "while *repelling* the enemy's assault by fire, close combat, or counterattack." It is unclear exactly what "repelling the enemy" might include. Further, the nature of combat missions aren't spatially discernible, as the phrases "well forward" and "closing the enemy" might suggest. The confusing language in the two policies reveals the difficulty of establishing a definitive line between combat and non-combat particularly in actual practice.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Increasing Presence of Women in Combat Roles**

The changing nature of warfare as well as military necessity has increasingly placed women in combat roles. Despite the ambiguities in policy, military commanders are assigning women where they need them. The time is long overdue for policy to catch up with practice.

### *The Battlefield Environment*

The absence of a clear line between enemy and friendly territory produces a situation where both women and men are always exposed to the possibility of combat, necessitating every soldier to be combat-ready.

- In late 2003 the Army revised its basic training protocol to prepare soldiers to irregular warfare. It was decided that all servicemembers would undergo combat training, including more weapons training, learning to protect against bombs and grenades and learning to fight in urban areas where enemies were indistinguishable from civilians. Recognizing that “women were working alongside war fighters, taking hostile fire – even in the role of designated support forces,” no gender distinction was made on who would receive combat training.<sup>13</sup>
- Beginning in 2005, the U.S. Army began placing women in Forward Support Companies (FSCs), which provide maintenance and support services to direct ground combat battalions, including infantry, armor and Special Forces. The Army recognizes this assignment will place women in combat situations, yet maintains that it is in compliance with the 1994 DoD policy.
- In May of 2005, an amendment was proposed which would remove all women from FSCs – which would have closed 21,925 positions currently open to servicewomen.<sup>14</sup> The amendment was opposed, suggesting an increasing level of recognition of the need for women in occupations and units regardless of their proximity to combat.
- Women also participate in raids and ride on convoys where the exposure to Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) is constant.

### *Lioness Teams*

Beginning in 2003, the U.S. Army established all-female (Lioness) teams specifically to accompany all-male Marine combat units into insurgent-infested areas of Ramadi, Iraq.

- Lioness teams originated from the military’s need for servicewomen to be present during home raids, at checkpoints, or any place where “Iraqi women’s honor” could be threatened by the presence of and/or contact with male troops.
- Women soldiers were primarily used in these instances to search Iraqi women for weapons or explosives. They also served as a “calming presence” for the women and children.
- Lioness teams routinely engaged in combat by nature of their missions and should be recognized and awarded as having done so. Mission success is clearly dependent on women filling these combat roles.

### *Female Engagement Teams (FETs)*

FETs are crucial to the U.S. military’s counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan and are attached to either infantry units for combat missions or, in the case of Marine FETs, to male maneuver units.

- In July of 2009 the Marine Corps officially began training FETs; there are now several teams run intermittently in southern Afghanistan and as of November 2009, all international and Afghan security forces were directed to establish FETs of their own.<sup>15</sup>
- In March 2010, the Marines trained forty women for the first full-time Female Engagement Teams, deployed to Helmand province in April 2010.

- The FET women practice “reflexive fire” as well as getting in and out of armored personnel carriers while under fire. The tasks of their mission - “calming,” interacting and building relationships with Afghan women - require that they go outside the wire, into hot zones.
- FETs are attached to combat units, not assigned. This bureaucratic sidestep allows the military access to servicewomen’s labor in combat situations without having to acknowledge them as combatants.<sup>16</sup>

### *Women on Submarines*

The number of talented women earning degrees in engineering and science prompted the U.S. Navy to lift the ban barring women from serving on submarines. For the first time, women are in the chain of command of a strategic first-strike nuclear defense asset, attesting to their competency in positions essential to national security.

- Allowing women on submarines is an issue that had been considered and rejected several times since 1993. In February 2010 Defense Secretary Robert Gates notified Congress that the Navy intended to allow women officers on submarines.
- 24 women officers are being integrated on guide-missile attack (SSGNs) and ballistic-missile (SSBNs) submarines. Allowing women to serve on submarines will provide them the opportunity for both forward deployed strike and strategic deterrent operational experience.

### **Women’s Career Advancement: The Military Leadership Diversity Commission (MJDC)**

The combat exclusion policy is an obstacle to women’s career advancement. As the MLDC’s report shows, the lack of women in leadership positions negatively effects not only individual women’s careers, but also the success of all branches of the Armed Services. SWAN contends the combat exclusion policy is one of the last remaining institutional glass ceilings for women, and agrees with the MLDC that the ban must be lifted.

- The MLDC argues that in order to respond to changing threats and military operations in the 21<sup>st</sup> global landscape, a more diverse military is needed – part of this diversification requires women to be more fully integrated in all levels of the Armed Forces.
- The report makes clear that increasing gender representation in the military is critical to military effectiveness and refutes claims that allowing women in ground infantry positions will harm morale or cohesiveness.
- The MLDC recognizes the current policies are obsolete for they refer to linear battlefields, and “do not reflect the current operational environment.” The MLDC acknowledges what has become common fact: women are in engaged in direct combat, whether or not it is their formally assigned role.
- The recruitment, promotion and advancement of talented women depends on lifting the current DoD and Service policies barring women from direct ground combat. These discriminatory policies “constitute a structural barrier that keeps women from entering the tactical career fields associated with promotion to flag/general officer grades and serving in career enhancing assignments.”<sup>17</sup>

## SWAN's Position

SWAN advocates for the elimination of all barriers to women's service in the military. SWAN agrees with the RAND report, which states that "neither the Army nor the DoD assignment policies for women are clearly understandable . . . There is no shared interpretation of the meaning of many of the words used in the policy, including *enemy*, *forward* or *well forward*, and *collocation*."<sup>18</sup> The discrepancies between the two policies suggest a major disconnect between the military and the government, as well as between the policy and the reality of asymmetric warfare. We contend that the DoD recognizes the need for women in combat positions yet is unprepared to stand for it politically. We urge the DoD to follow the recommendations of the MLDC and lift the current ban. Policy must be rewritten to reflect the nature of modern warfare and to allow women to perform in units and specialties at *any* level at which they are capable, regardless of whether or not they are considered "combat" roles.

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<sup>1</sup> Women in the Military Service for America Memorial, "Statistics on Women in the Military." Data current as of Sept. 30, 2010. (<http://www.womensmemorial.org/Press/stats.html>)

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Veterans Affairs ([http://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/news/feature/womens\\_health.cfm](http://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/news/feature/womens_health.cfm))

<sup>3</sup> "U.S. Military Casualty Statistics: Operation New Dawn, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom" by Hannah Fischer, Sept 28, 2010 (<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22452.pdf>).

<sup>4</sup> Center for Women Veterans, United States Department of Veterans Affairs (<http://www.publichealth.va.gov/womenshealth/facts.asp>).

<sup>5</sup> "Population Representation in the Military Services" Fiscal Year 2009 Report, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> "Women Veterans Health Care: Facts and Statistics," Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards (<http://www.publichealth.va.gov/womenshealth/facts.asp>).

<sup>7</sup> "From Representation to Inclusion: Diversity Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Military," Final Report of the Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2011, p 46, 48.

<sup>8</sup> Les Aspin, Secretary of Defense, "Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule," memorandum, 13 Jan 1994. Italics added.

<sup>9</sup> "Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women," RAND report prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Les Aspin, Secretary of Defense, "Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule," memorandum, 13 Jan 1994. Italics added.

<sup>11</sup> "Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women," RAND report prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. xv.

<sup>12</sup> The DoD's policy also states that women should be restricted from assignments "below the brigade level" while the Army policy specifies "battalion size or smaller": neither reflect the recent modularization, or redesigning the Army structure to have more active duty brigades.

<sup>13</sup> See Chapman, Anne W. *Mixed-Gender Basic Training The U.S. Army Experience, 1973-2004*. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Fort Monroe, VA. 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Solaro, Erin. 2006. *Women in the Line of Fire*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press. p. 232.

<sup>15</sup> Pottinger, Matt, Hali Jilan, and Claire Russo. "Half-Hearted: Trying to Win Afghanistan without Afghan Women." *Small Wars Journal*. 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "From Representation to Inclusion: Diversity Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Military," Final Report of the Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2011, p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> "Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women," RAND report prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. xiv.