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Lift the ban on women in combat, panel says

By Joseph Picard

Women who are qualified to serve in combat should be allowed to do so, according to a nonpartisan commission tasked with promoting equal opportunity in the U.S. military services.

The Military Leadership Diversity Commission is going to recommend to President Obama and Congress that the longstanding ban against women serving in combat be lifted, according to the commission's website.

The commission, which is comprised of current and retired officers, senior noncommissioned officers and civilians, is due to make its formal recommendations in March.

The Service Women's Action Network applauded the news, but noted that, in effect, women are already serving in combat or near-combat situations.

The ban "ignores the reality of current war-fighting doctrine," Anuradha Bhagwati, former Marine Corps Captain and executive director of SWAN, said in a published report.

Current U.S. military policy prohibits women from serving in combat units below the brigade level. And although women make up 14.6 percent of the military, they and minority members still are underrepresented in leadership posts, the commission said in its draft report.

"Increasing the racial, ethnic and gender diversity of senior leadership requires eliminating barriers that disproportionately affect the advancement of women and minorities," the draft report said, noting that this can be done on two levels - first, through education and mentoring, so that every service member can prepare for career advancements.

"Second, DOD and the services must remove institutional barriers to open traditionally closed doors, especially those related to assignments," the commission said. "An important step in this direction, recommended by the commission, is to remove the restrictions that prevent women from engaging in direct ground combat."

Retired Army Lt. Gen. Julius W. Becton, Jr., a commission member, told a National Defense University conference on Jan. 11 that the commission would recommend lifting the ban.

"What we are saying is that women may be assigned to any job they are qualified for," Becton said. "We are making a recommendation. We are saying, 'Let's remove barriers.' And I think people are very qualified to do certain jobs, but because of their gender, they are not given the opportunity to do them."

Becton noted that, while the commission can make recommendations, it will be up to Congress to decide on whether the ban stays or goes.

Opponents to allowing women to serve in combat situations have raised the issues of women's stamina and strength, arguments similar to those brought against allowing women on police and firefighting forces. But the number of women police officers and firefighters is increasing nationwide.

Another main argument against women in combat is that their inclusion in combat units may be detrimental to unit cohesion, an objection similar to that made regarding openly gay people in the military.

The nation removed the ban against openly gay people serving in the military last December, when Congress passed and President Obama signed the repeal of the military's Don't Ask Don't Tell policy.

SWAN's Bhagwati, who called the ban "archaic," said in a blog entry that despite the policy "the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have blurred the frontlines, thrusting servicewomen fully into combat roles."

She said that commanders often used women "in missions that require close interaction with local Iraqi and Afghan populations."

Both the Army and Marine Corps employ women on the battlefield "through the use of ad hoc Female Engagement Teams (FETs) and Lioness Teams, which are often tasked to work with combat arms units," Bhagwati said.

In addition, "women are used daily in missions that entail high risk of direct fire, such as convoys with high exposure to Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)," she said.

Bhagwait noted that over 220,000 women have served thus far in Iraq and Afghanistan, making up 11 percent of the total troops deployed in those countries.

"Women are fighting with distinction, earning some of the military's highest awards, including the Silver Star," she said.

Women are also suffering on a par with men, at least as regards the "invisible wounds" of war, coming home with post traumatic stress disorder and depression, and developing related conditions like substance abuse, homelessness and suicide.

"Despite the changing roles of women in combat, many women still struggle to receive the same military awards and veterans' benefits as their male peers," Bhagwati said. "Congressional policy on banning women from direct ground combat must change in order to recognize women's actual accomplishments on the battlefield."