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# Politics likely to keep women out of combat units

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U.S. Army Spc. Rebecca Buck, a medic from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, provides perimeter security outside an Iraqi police station in the Tarmiya Province of Iraq, March 30, 2008.

U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY TECH. SGT. WILLIAM GREER/WWW.ARMY.MIL

WASHINGTON — Despite a new report recommending that women be allowed to serve in combat units, supporters of the idea said they don't expect it to happen this year.

The problem comes from both the Pentagon, where defense officials say the issue isn't a top priority, and Capitol Hill, where conservative House lawmakers who unsuccessfully tried to block the "don't ask, don't tell" repeal last year will be loath to allow another major cultural shift for front-line fighters.

"We're going to continue to push for a change, but the chances of putting women in those combat roles is probably less likely now than it was last session," said Rep. Loretta Sanchez, a California Democrat who has been a leading voice pushing for an end to the combat restrictions on women. "We've seen the push back from the 'don't ask, don't tell' debate, and those interest groups will fight against any of these changes."

Until now, either U.S. law or Pentagon policy has prohibited female troops from serving in any unit whose primary mission is direct ground combat, although they may serve in combat support roles.

In a draft report last week, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission said those restrictions should be lifted because they hurt female troops' career advancement opportunities and limit commanders' ability to pick the best person for a mission.

The final version of that report is due to the Pentagon and Congress in March, along with an Army review of military occupational specialties that is expected to address women in combat.

Women make up about 10 percent of the military force deployed overseas. Pentagon officials acknowledge that many are already facing combat conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the report notes that commanders have found ways around the restrictions to use female troops on combat missions.

Defense officials do not need congressional approval to change the rules, but must give lawmakers at least 30 days notice before enacting them. Last year, the Navy announced plans to allow women to serve onboard submarines without any vote by lawmakers, although they did discuss the move in numerous Capitol Hill hearings.

For now, Congress has barely acknowledged the topic. Officials from the House Armed Services Committee said they are waiting for the Pentagon reports before any response, and their Senate counterparts have not taken a public stance on the issue.

“I don’t know if we’ll even have a hearing, because it’s hard to sit face to face with female veterans who have sacrificed overseas and then deny that something needs to change,” said Anu Bhagwati, executive director of Service Women’s Action Network.

Bhagwati expressed doubt that either the Pentagon or Congress have the political will right now to make a change in the near future. Instead, she’s hopeful that the next few months, the new report will help the issue gain public momentum.

Sanchez said she expects little Republican support for lifting the ban right now, especially as several House members are looking for ways to blunt the impending impact of openly gay troops serving for the first time.

As an alternative, she plans to push legislation allowing female troops to include their unofficial combat experience in their official military records, which would help with promotion and career advancement. While medals for battlefield valor are reflected in those files, other combat experience is not.

American Women Veterans has backed similar proposals as a first step toward wider integration of women into combat units. Sanchez called the idea an easy compromise for lawmakers leery about letting women serve on the front lines.

“If a woman finds herself in combat, let’s say what she did,” she said. “Let’s give her credit for that.”

**Stars and Stripes reporter Kevin Baron contributed to this story.**

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