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The Extent of Restrictions on the Service of Active-Component Military Women

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Summary

Background

Women have long served in the U.S. military, although always as a minority. During wartime, women's level of participation has expanded to meet the demand for military personnel; this was particularly true during World War II (Godson, 2002; Holm, 1993; Moore, 1996; Poulos, 1996; Segal, 1995). In the 1970s, an unprecedented increase in women's participation in the civilian labor force, coupled with the advent of the all-volunteer force in 1973, changed the thinking of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and the military services with regard to the roles women could play in the armed forces. The services could no longer simply draft the number of individuals needed; they had to recruit them. To help fill their ranks, the services opened more roles to women, but within a set of rules designed to protect women from the possibility of being captured, injured, or killed by the enemy and to preserve privacy in living conditions.

For the Army and Marine Corps, initial thoughts about where women could be assigned were shaped by the perception of a linear battlefield, with a dangerous "front" and a comparatively safer "rear," with certain units (e.g., combat arms battalions and below in the Army) designed to directly combat an enemy on the ground and other units (e.g., service support units, command units) designed to serve behind those units and not directly confront the enemy. Women could be assigned jobs in the units expected to be located in the rear but not those expected to serve at the front. In 1988, the system was formalized when DoD promulgated the "risk rule," which banned women from units or occupations in which the risk of exposure to direct combat or capture was equal to or greater than that of combat units in the same theater.

However, during the Gulf War of 1991, women were among the military personnel who participated in combat flying operations, served within range of enemy artillery, served with ground combat units and in some cases ahead of other combat units, were exposed to enemy hostilities, and received service combat awards. As a result, in 1994, the risk rule was jettisoned and replaced by one that said women could be assigned to any position for which they were qualified, except in units whose primary

purpose was direct ground combat. The new policy also contained criteria under which the services could, but were not required to, retain gender restrictions:

where the Service Secretary attests that the costs of appropriate berthing or privacy arrangements are prohibitive;

where units and positions are doctrinally required to physically collocate and remain with direct ground combat units that are closed to women;

where units are engaged in long range reconnaissance operations and Special Operations Forces missions; and

where job related physical requirements would necessarily exclude the vast majority of women Service members. (Aspin, 1994)

Under this policy today, women's representation in the services ranges from a low of 7 percent in the Marine Corps to a high of 19 percent in the Air Force.

Although opportunities for women have expanded substantially in all services, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission noted that women were underrepresented in both the senior noncommissioned officer and flag and general officer ranks and that they had significantly lower retention rates. The commission cited combat exclusion policies as an important barrier for female service members and recommended that the services eliminate all combat exclusion policies for women. The 2011 National Defense Authorization Act directed the Secretary of Defense and the service secretaries to review all policies and regulations to determine whether they needed to be changed to ensure that female service members have equitable opportunities to serve.

Purpose

In response, the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness established the Women in the Services Review (WISR) to review all restrictive policies, regulations, and laws to determine whether they prevent women from competing and excelling in the U.S. armed forces. DoD asked RAND to support WISR's efforts by describing and quantifying the positions closed to women, pursuing additional information about perceived career implications for a few of the open occupations, and participating in WISR meetings. This report describes the current restrictions of women's service, relying primarily on policy and service authorization data, as well as service personnel data and communication with service representatives. RAND researchers focused on describing occupations that are entirely closed to women as well as occupations that are open to them but with positions in some units closed. For a limited number of open occupations, additional details about the extent of the restrictions and potential implications of those restrictions are explored. This report does not debate the merits of the current policies.

Findings

The overwhelming majority of positions whose primary orientation is engaging the enemy with deadly force from the ground are in the Army and the Marine Corps. Gender restrictions based on direct ground combat close off to women entire occupations in the combat arms, as well as some types of units entirely, regardless of the occupations they include. In units not engaged in combat, some positions are also closed because of the requirement that the incumbent come from occupations closed to women or hold additional skills that women cannot obtain under current policies.

Special operations occupations closed to women are physically demanding—even for men who attempt to enter them. The elite status of the special forces means that some of the most prestigious military occupations are closed to women. However, not all positions in special operations commands are closed to women.

DoD policy gives the services the discretion to close positions to women that would require collocation with direct ground combat units. The way the forces operate today, frequent interaction of support personnel and units with direct ground combat units is common and necessary. Women have been serving successfully in non-direct ground combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan at the same camps and forward operating bases as direct ground combat units but without being assigned to those units. They have traveled on dangerous roads in convoys and intermingled with local populations. The Secretary of the Army reported that more than 13,000 positions in the Army are closed to women due solely to the collocation restriction.

In the Navy, many restrictions are due to berthing and privacy limitations, because of the expense of modifying seagoing vessels, and generally apply to enlisted women, because officers on ships enjoy a higher degree of privacy. Most Navy specialties that are closed to women due to berthing and privacy constraints are submarine specialties. However, the first female officers trained to serve on submarines graduated in the fall of 2011. To provide privacy for enlisted men and women on submarines, modifications of existing berthing configurations will be necessary.

To provide greater flexibility in meeting the Navy's needs, and to better sustain women's opportunities for sea-duty assignments, the revised Navy policy requires future ship modifications to provide gender-neutral modular designs.

Recommendations for Improved Recordkeeping

Over the course of this research effort, we discovered instances of ambiguity, errors, and conflicting information about whether positions were closed to women. Thus, we recommend that the services improve the tracking, accuracy, and visibility of positions closed to military women.

All positions that are closed to women should be coded to reflect all applicable closures. This would provide visibility to DoD and service leadership about what is closed and also help detailers, career field managers, and requesting and receiving commanders consistently apply exclusion policies, which, in some cases, are open to differing interpretations and have been inconsistently applied.