



# Gendered Inhibitors to Successful Military Service and Combat Integration for Female Soldiers



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## Abstract

January 2016 marked the inaugural year of the Pentagon’s historic decision to open ground combat positions up to qualified women serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. This decision has reinvigorated the debate surrounding the expression of traditional gender roles and whether or not women belong in this male-dominated environment. Utilizing military research and case studies, this analysis examines the major positives and negatives of combat integration. An analysis of the data reveals that the military offers unparalleled paths for career advancement and empowerment, but the overall process of militarization is extremely harmful to both men and women. Particularly in relation to the gendered treatment of combat-related PTSD for females and sexual assault trauma for males, both men and women have suffered from the strict adherence to traditional gender roles and increased militarization.



## Introduction

Qualified women are now able to fill military occupation specialties (MOSs) in infantry, artillery, and special forces units, and the debate surrounding female military service continues to build while the gendered implications of militarization for both men and women become increasingly evident. This ruling seeks to recognize women who have been serving on the front lines of combat for decades, most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, with no formal acknowledgement or post-service benefits for their contributions. Initially viewed as a victory for female empowerment, their service continues to be met with mixed debate both from within and outside of the military (Bown et al., 2010; Millegan et al. 2015). This study engages this debate, but moves it further by acknowledging that women have already been serving in these roles, now, as their breadth of involvement expands, the lasting effects of this increased militarization must be examined.

**Research Question: What are the major positives and negatives of female combat integration? Further, what effect are traditional gender expectations having on military personnel, particularly when seeking treatment for military related trauma?**

**Argument: Combat integration provides unparalleled paths to career advancement and empowerment for female soldiers, but that the overall process of militarization imbedded in this masculine environment is extremely harmful to both men and women. Nevertheless, combat integration has brought to light the major consequences that militarization and the strict adherence to traditional gender roles has had on both male and female soldiers, especially in relation to post service trauma treatment.**

## Methods

### Theory

Militarization –

- “A step-by-step process by which something gradually becomes *controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from* the military as an institution or militaristic criteria” (Enloe, 2000).

Difference Feminism –

- “focuses on valorizing the feminine—that is, valuing the unique contributions of women *as* women. Difference feminists do not think women do all things as well as men or vice versa” (Goldstein, 2014).

Liberal Feminism –

- “rejects these claims as being based on stereotyped gender roles. Liberal feminists see the “essential” differences in men’s and women’s abilities or perspectives as trivial or nonexistent—men and women are equal” (Goldstein, 2014).

Postmodern Feminism –

- “criticize liberal feminists for trying merely to integrate women into traditional structures of war and foreign policy. They criticize difference feminists as well, for glorifying traditional feminine virtues” (Goldstein, 2014).

Militarized Masculinity –

- “Hegemonic masculinity is characterized by “risk-taking, self-discipline, physical toughness and/or muscular development, aggression, violence, emotional control, and overt heterosexual desire” (Hinojosa, 2015).
- “Masculinist military culture inscribes gender differences as natural and positions masculinity both in opposition to and superior to femininity” (Weitz, 2015).

Militarized Femininity –

- “Myth that war and the military are matters primarily reserved for men; we now know that both men and women have been socialized to support ideologies of national security and defense, and to serve the military system” (Isaksson, 1988)
- Enloe “accuses the military of exploiting the rhetoric of empowerment in order to use women's labor, while at the same time barring women from achieving first-class status within this institution, since combat positions remain the ultimate symbol of sacrifice and service” (in Silva, 2008).



In 2012 of the probable 26,000 estimated victims of military sexual assaults 14,000 or 53.8% of the victims were men. (Millegan et al., 2016). This about 1.2% of men. This means around 12,000 sexual assault victims are female, but this accounts for 6.1% of the total female service member population (Bell et al., 2014)



Women make up 15.5% of active duty service members and men comprise 84.5% (DoD, 2015).

## Findings

Positives:

- Arena to prove equal capabilities and full participation
- Access to post-service resources (i.e. education, health care, maternity leave)
- Empowerment and leadership opportunities
- Prestige and career advancement into political office

Negatives:

- Exposure to high risk injury situations
- Negative rhetoric surrounding female capabilities
- Socialization into high drinking and substance abuse cultures
- Sexual assault and harassment trauma
- Combat exposure and posttraumatic stress disorder
- Difficulty receiving treatment for combat connected trauma for women, and delegitimizing of male sexual assault

## Conclusion

The positives of female combat service may seem initially evident when examining combat as the last area barring women from full engagement in our democracy. Liberal feminists have been waiting for years for this kind of access to the same opportunities as men. Be those opportunities for political office, promotions, and other leadership appointments. However, inviting women further into the system of militarization does possess its own dangers. American society has accepted these dangers for men, because of traditional gender expectations of men as warriors, but as the era of female combat service is upon us, the stakes seem considerably higher.

The major negatives of female service are evident in the prevalence of injury rates, when women are seen as less capable, socialized into heavy drinking, made victims of sexual assault, and barred from proper trauma treatment. Postmodern feminists caution against these very effects, as products of simply placing women into an already flawed system. So what does this mean for society as we expose our mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives to the most explicit horrors of war? Increased dependence on the military system, a system not necessarily built for their success, is proving to be extremely harmful. However, the integration of females has highlighted these downsides of militarization, not just for women but also for men. Particularly in relation to post-service trauma treatment, the inclusion of women highlights the ways gendered expectations for males and females are prohibiting service members from receiving care. Whether these benefits are worth the risks of increased militarization within this flawed system is uncertain.

## Implications and Further Research

This area of study has multiple areas for policy recommendations, including the implementation of gender-neutral training practices. Perhaps breaking down biological sex differences and pursuing more inclusive training could reduce injury for all soldiers. Certainly, the structures in place to report and prosecute sexual traumas need to be examined, but before that a general societal legitimization of male sexual assault, could push policy in that direction. Further studies in this area would benefit from examining genders outside the binaries of male and female. Perhaps looking at transgender service members or other non-binary individuals would offer additional insights

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