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Women in Combat Roles in US Military: Still a small step to equality

By Fitriani and Ron Matthews

Synopsis

In February 2012, the Pentagon announced a new policy to open combat positions for women in the US Armed Forces. How big a change will this shift in policy bring to the structure of the US military?

Commentary

IN A SHIFT from its 1994 combat exclusion policy for women, the US Armed Forces will open 14,000 positions for women closer to the frontline from February this year. While the decision is welcomed by those seeking equal employment opportunities for women others argue that women in the battlefield will weaken the morale of troops as well as their combat readiness. Thus the policy is perceived as undermining US military operations.

Nevertheless the US move could well have repercussions on armed forces around the world. So far 13 other countries, mostly in Europe, allow women to take part in close combat roles: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden and South Korea. Asia, especially, has witnessed a greater access for women in the military in recent years. The Indian Armed Forces, for instance, are gradually accepting women. India plans to open up its military academy to women in 2013, and is also considering granting officer commissions to servicewomen up to a maximum of 14 years. Further, India's neighbour, China, is launching its first training course for women to become warship commanders in 2011, bringing PLA servicewomen a step closer to the frontline.

Strategic Implications

According to Pentagon Press the new policy is designed to offer more opportunities for women in the armed forces. The US military traditionally placed women in brigades with 3,500 troops, minimising their contact with the enemy. The new policy will enable women to be in smaller groups - battalions of around 800 personnel -, allowing them to move faster and closer to the adversary. The US servicewomen can now work as artillery mechanics for armoured tanks, fire detection specialists and frontline intelligence officers. However, there are still restrictions for women to serve in combat units. These limits include jobs in special units, jobs deemed physically demanding and assignments where units have no privacy, that is no separate sleeping accommodations.

The effect of the policy therefore, is limited. The Army will open less than ten percent of the jobs that were barred for servicewomen, equal to six enlisted military vocations. The Marines will unbolt 371 jobs, equivalent to

one percent of the 54,000 restricted jobs. The Navy will open 60 positions of the nearly 34,000 positions that excluded women. The policy will have no effect on the Air Force because it has already opened 99 percent of its jobs to servicewomen.

In all the Pentagon will open just one percent of previously reserved military jobs for women leaving 20 percent of the services closed to them. This means 236,000 military positions in the US Armed Forces are still barred, including in infantry, combat tank units and elite forces Navy SEALs and Army Delta Force. In short, there is no drastic change in US military's force structure.

The Limit of Freedom

Still, the new policy shows progress for women in uniform - a long standing debate of female empowerment in a highly masculine field. Critics have long highlighted the limited career and promotion opportunities for servicewomen due to curbs imposed for jobs vital for war-fighting missions. This situation resulted in women's under-representation in the Pentagon's senior leadership where around 80 percent of US general officers come from tactical and operational careers that are barred to women.

Not that the country disallows female military leaders. The US already has several high-ranking female generals. In the Army, 24 of the 403 general officers are female, with its first female four-star general appointed in 2008. The Air Force will soon have its four-star general who was nominated to the rank in early February. However, these few high-ranking military women are seen as only token concessions for around 200,000 female US military personnel (14 percent of 1.5 million), though justifying the claim of equality and freedom for women.

For a country that had deployed more than 255,000 women in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, limiting servicewomen access to employment is arguably dated. In both operations, some 144 female troops have died and 855 others have been wounded. These women have the same determination to serve their country as their fellow servicemen.

Beyond the policy shift

Opposition to women taking up direct combat roles stems more from the dual-stereotypes of weak-women and strong-men. Some worry that women do not have the strength to do the job and fear that the existence of women will harm combat unit effectiveness because men will tend to protect women rather than fulfil the mission. Nonetheless, there are some women who meet the physical and mental requirements for combat forces. And when it comes to commitment to mission, the measurable factor is not the person's gender but rather, how professional one is.

The traditional reason for not having women in combat is rooted in roles chauvinism; that while men's patriotic obligation is deemed to defend the state, women are supposed to play the role of reproducing for the nation. A similar argument is behind Germany's not invoking military conscription for women despite its support for the European Union's Equal Opportunity Act. Women are seen as delicate creatures and perceived to be unsuitable for bearing arms. Women are not given the opportunity to be stronger and to take part in wars.

Despite the limits, the US policy change is still a big step forward. Incorporating women in a highly masculine environment can be the biggest cultural shift for the military as an institution. The US is embarking on a cultural change to alter the situation that will be a long and slow process. The key is not to dismiss the leadership and strength that women can bring to the armed forces before they are given the opportunity to prove themselves.

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