



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 016/2013 dated 29 January 2013

Walking the talk: US service women in combat roles

By Fitriani and Ron Matthews

Synopsis

At the end of January 2013, the Pentagon announced it would lift the ban on women serving in frontline combat roles. Although the services can still object, American women have been given the chance to participate in front-line combat duty by the enduring war on terrorism.

Commentary

AFTER ALMOST 20 years a 1994 U S rule that limited the roles for women in its armed forces to units below brigade level away from direct combat, was overturned on 24 January 2013 by Defence Secretary, Leon Panetta. He announced the DoD's renewed commitment that "everyone is entitled to a chance" to serve their nation in a combat role, thereby affecting the existing 14 per cent of America's 1.4 million active military personnel that are women, opening up 230,000 previously barred frontline positions. However, the services have until January 2016 to come up with reasons why women should remain barred from combat positions.

Welcoming Equality

The debate on whether women should be fully integrated into the armed forces originated in the 1940s by the alignment of the women, blacks and ethnics minorities. The debate led to a breakthrough in allowing interracial military structures, but the admission of women into America's armed forces was left on the table, for two reasons. Firstly, the belief remained that women were incapable of fulfilling the required fitness standards due to their relatively small body size and reduced endurance compared to men. Yet, the US Chairman of the Joint Military Chiefs, General Martin Dempsey stated that the new regulation will not change the physical and training standards already in place. The difference is that now the US military will allow women the chance to meet them, including the highest levels of fitness required by the Army Delta Force and Navy SEALs.

The second reason women have been excluded from units below brigade level is the need to maintain unit cohesion, as allowing women to operate in male-dominated military roles would distract men from mission aims, by seeking to protect women. The rule of the game was that unit cohesion, the bedrock on which performance of armies rest, has been traditionally built around male bonding; the US military now appears ready to redefine the calculus on unit cohesion, including the challenging issue of male-and-female bonding. For this, the Pentagon may need to evaluate the experiences of other militaries employing women in combat roles.

Trend Changing Law

Several countries already have women serving in combat units. Scandinavian countries, for example, Denmark (1978), Norway (1984) and Sweden (1989), were amongst the first states to pave the way for women to gain equal opportunities in the military. Moreover, the 1980s surge in global advocacy to end discrimination against women pushed countries to issue national and regional Equal Employment Acts to enforce similar legal demands in their respective armed forces. The Canada Human Rights Act tribunal in 1989 ordered the country's military forthwith to integrate women into the country's armed forces, except in submarines - due to the limited infrastructure. Germany also faced similar legal processes, because its Constitution prohibited women from bearing arms, until finally the European Court of Justice in 2001 ruled that Germany must allow women the same rights as men in serving their country. Since then women have served in the Bundeswehr in the same operational roles as men.

Pressure for equality in the US army has been rising during the last decade as America's war against terrorism wore on. The matter came to a head in November 2012, when four women soldiers sued the US DoD because of the inequality of constraining women from serving in the frontlines. The reasoning was that more than 280,000 US female soldiers had been sent to Iraq, Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, and 152 of the 6,600 of US fatalities were women, proving that there is no real difference between front- or rear-lines once troops are deployed. By changing its stand, the US is saving money, time as well as potentially adverse publicity in ending the court hearings initiated by the aggrieved female soldiers. At a stroke, the move also demonstrates that the US Administration is 'walking the talk' domestically by supporting women empowerment, freedom and equality; a cause that is currently a major plank of Obama's foreign policy.

Looking Ahead

Just as the pursuit of war can be justified by diplomatic jargon, such as the responsibility to protect, the integration of women into the exclusive 'macho' military realm is a sound form of public relations for projecting inclusiveness and meritocracy. In 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1325 emphasising the importance of female participation in peace and security processes, not least because women represent the neglected and victimised in conflict situations. A decade on, the UNSC has adopted four more Resolutions both in support of women empowerment and ending gender-based violence. The UNSC's aim is to change the perception of women in conflict from being the problem to becoming part of the solution.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has initiated a five year campaign (to 2014), aimed at lifting the percentage of women peacekeepers to 20 per cent for police units and 10 per cent for military contingents. However, until 2012, UN women peacekeepers accounted for only 10 per cent of police units and just three per cent of military attachments. The lack of availability of women in security forces is a problem, but shortages may soon ease. Last year, South Korea and Australia decided to allow women to join frontline combatants. Now that the US has announced its preparedness to allow women the right to take on combat roles, it is anticipated that other countries will soon follow suit, as they run out of excuses to bar women from exercising basic citizenship rights in defending their country.

Fitriani is an RSIS researcher in Gender and Security Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University and Professor Ron Matthews holds the Chair in Defence Economics at RSIS.