

Red, White, and Pink: Women in Direct Combat

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Today's world is ever changing. With greater advancements in technology, newer scientific research and discoveries, and stronger military defense, it is no wonder why the United States is recognized globally for its superiority to many other countries. New job positions for several individuals have opened up in various fields as a result of these advancements. Despite this, women are still facing discrimination in the workforce; there is heated debate as to whether the ban on women in combat should have been lifted. Placing restrictions on women's roles in the military renders the United States a misogynist nation, something equal rights activists have been trying to eliminate for decades. Women should be allowed to engage in direct military combat despite the obvious physical and biological differences, the social construction of women, and the accused disruption of the necessary cohesion in formerly all-male units.

While women and men do differ biologically, it is inaccurate to say that all women and men have such significant physical differences, such as menstruation and pregnancy, which make women an ill fit for combat warfare. Simons contends that women have characteristics that men do not have: "menstrual periods, the potential for pregnancy, [and] breast milk" (2000, para. 11). While all of Simons' points are valid, he fails to successfully explain why each of these biological traits should be viewed as uncontrollable hindrances to a female's performance in combat. Moskos discussed menstruation with several female soldiers, all of whom did not seem to be worried about menstruation keeping them from performing their assigned tasks. The women noted that they are expected to plan out their menstruation routine (Moskos, 1992, p. 45). This initiative is necessary for women in all aspects of the work force, not just the military. Very few employers, if any, are going to go out of their way to make sure that the women working for

them are taking care of their personal needs. Likewise, women in any occupation are not likely to share with their employers when they are experiencing cramps, bloating, or menstruation pains.

Aside from menstruation concerns, there is the complication of women being able to be impregnated. Quester, even in the late seventies acknowledges, “The issue of pregnancy [being] a valid one”; however, he also counters “birth control techniques have obviously reached a point where women do not have to become pregnant if they do not want to, and the military is supremely well suited to overcoming the taboos that might hold back knowledge of such techniques” (1977, p. 88). Pregnancy is not, and should not be a reason used against women in the military. Women, even prior to the ban on combat being lifted, were placed in close quarters with men during wartime. Women served dutifully as nurses during World War II and were constantly surrounded by male soldiers. Even in non-combat units today, women are forced to work intimately with their male counterparts. Women in combat are no more likely to get pregnant than women in non-combat positions. This declaration not only degrades the morality of the women, but also fallaciously assumes that all women will engage in sexual activity while deployed.

Accompanying the biological differences are the physical differences between men and women. Women are repeatedly reported as being significantly physically weaker than men. According to the Commission, “Women are shorter, have less muscle mass and weigh less than men, placing them at a distinct disadvantage when performing tasks requiring a high level of muscular strength” such as ground combat (1991, p. 63). While women are typically smaller in stature than men, there are still instances where smaller framed men join the military and are able to engage in direct combat. The smallest of the males could be smaller than some of the females that are considered average in height. However, because of the gendered stereotype regarding

men and women's strengths, the military only sees the women as being too dainty for combat, while men, who can be much shorter and smaller, are accepted with little hesitation. Quester acknowledges many believe "The military uses more labor, and less capital, than it admits to. It uses more brawn, and less machinery" (1977, p. 87). While this claim may have been an accurate summary and thought process in the 1970s, it is in no way applicable to today's technologically dependent world. Over the past thirty-six years since that article was published, technology has dramatically changed and is continuing to change daily. Televisions have gone from gigantic monstrosities to sleek, hi-definition treasures, and cell phones are significantly smaller and more convenient to carry than before. Both the television and the cell phone were particularly large and unnecessarily bulky, but are now lighter and sleeker. This same principle can easily be paralleled to heavy artillery. With today's technological advances, "there is no inherent reason why the entire operations of a B-52 bomber or a Minuteman missile silo could not be redesigned to require no more strength than the power-steering of an American automobile" (Quester, 1977, p. 88). Quester, even in the 1970s, recognized that the United States was fully capable of making easier to handle machinery that was once deemed difficult. It is equally unjust to say that all men are naturally built to handle this heavy artillery; the United States has the military advancements necessary to develop lighter equipment that is more ready to take into battle, regardless of a soldier's strength or size.

Women should not be restricted because of the physical limitations society places on them. All men who decide to join the military are not always incredibly strong, or incredibly big. Not all of the men that are passed by the medical assessors are at all muscular; the regimen implemented by the military makes them stronger. Male soldiers "become more muscular after the physical exercises required by the military, but women . . . are capable of the same

conditioning” (Quester, 1977, p. 88). MacKenzie contends, “With proper training and necessary adaptations, women can complete the same physical tasks as men” (MacKenzie, 2012, para. 14). While women may require additional training to that of their male comrades, the additional training would “further decrease the gap between female and male service members, and evidence indicates that women usually benefit substantially from fitness-training programs” (MacKenzie, 2012, para. 15). This not only will decrease gender inequality in the military, but it would also promote diversity. The endorsement of diversity will ultimately strengthen the units by exposing their militias to what most of the technologically advanced world has already experienced: gender equality.

One of the greatest obstacles standing in the way of the United States Military overcoming gender inequality in the workforce is the social construction that women are nurturers and can never be seen as natural born killers. To begin with, who is born with the natural compulsion to kill? It is imprudent to think that any clinically sane human being naturally has desires to kill other human beings in very gruesome ways. Men, contrary to what many believe, are not born wanting to kill other men. Likewise, women are not born knowing how to sew and wash clothes; they are acquired skills that take practice and willingness to learn. If women are willing to learn the tactics necessary to be successful in military combat, why should they not be able to carry out these learned strategies? People who agree that women should be able to carry out learned techniques still have trouble grasping the idea of them working so closely with men in stressful environments.

Women should not be denied the right to fight in combat because of how social constructions have placed them at a higher risk of being sexually assaulted and more mentally unstable. Sexual harassment and sexual violence has long since been used as a reason that

women do not belong in military combat; “An astonishing one-third of female service members . . . say they have experienced sexual harassment while serving” (Eberstadt, 2010, p. 41).

However, women suffer from sexual harassment in all places of the workforce, not just in the military. According to Dr. Carla Corroto, one-quarter of all women in non-military related jobs say they have experienced some form of sexual harassment at their workplace (Interview, November 19, 2013). Service member or not, sexual harassment is occurring to women every day. Women, however, do not dwell on these statistics. Many women in the military assume that it comes with the nature of the job and do not spend hours worrying about unwanted male attention. Many also argue that women working in traditionally male-oriented jobs may have an “increased risk for excess morbidity, including mental disorders, compared with women working in more traditional roles” (Lindstrom et al., 2006, p. 162). There are those that believe women cannot handle the stresses that accompany the life of a direct combat soldier. While some women may not be able to handle the stress, there are equally as many men that could not handle the constant violence and grotesqueness of the line of work. An experiment performed by Lindstrom and colleagues concluded, “Women in combat support occupations were found to be significantly less likely to be hospitalized for a mental disorder than women in all other military occupations” (Lindstrom et al., 2006, p. 162). This study disproves the idea that women are less emotionally traumatized than people want to believe.

The socially constructed idea that women are unable to cope with living in close quarters with men is also erroneous. Women in all branches of the military are placed in these positions, soldiers in direct combat being no different. Knowing this nearly inevitable fate, women have made several adaptations to their daily routines to ensure a reasonable amount of privacy. According to Maskos, “Women drape [blankets] over a rope between the main tent poles to gain

some privacy, although someone on the other side can easily peer over the top” (1992, p. 44). By doing this, the women have made an attempt to claim privacy; however, it is up to the men to respect this privacy. Maskos continues to say, that despite the easy access, so-to-speak, “men generally display some regard for privacy,” just not always as much as women would like (1992, p. 44). This brings up a very valid argument: Why should a woman be restricted because of a man’s incapacity to refrain from being intrusive to her personal space? The military should put more focus on getting equal effort from both genders, rather than using the male’s inability to respect privacy as a reason that women do not belong in such an environment. Women have met men halfway in the effort to encourage privacy: Many women sleep in their fatigues or gym clothes, and some have mastered the art of changing their clothes inside of their sleeping bags. A solution to this problem could be to assign all women, regardless of squad or platoon, to the same tent, and likewise, all men to another tent. This idea is plausible, but when asked for personal preference, women claimed that they would rather sleep in a tent with men and women that they know well, than sleep in a tent with all women that they do not know at all (Maskos, 1992, p. 42).

Having women taken as prisoners of war is another socially constructed reason why many feel that women do not naturally belong in combat. According to Rogan, “Congress has periodic seizures about females coming home in body bags” (1981, p. 18). Has America become so immune to male soldiers being killed that Congress does not mourn their deaths? A soldier, regardless of sex, should be honored, and their death, in no way, should be taken any lighter than another. Many, though, still cannot stand the thought of foreign men having their hands on American women, making them sources of sexual pleasure and torturing them. Despite these claims, Holm contends, “Observers of Arab culture . . . contended that a female POW might

have less to fear than male prisoners because of the ‘revered’ position of women in the Arab world” (Holm, 1992, p. 456). There will always be captors that give no sympathy for either gender, but many will keep women around longer, even if just for sexual pleasure. While this situation is not ideal, and no one should have to withstand rape or sexual harassment, one has to look at it as life or death; the captors can either kill their captives, or they can temporarily mistreat them. If people are mistreated, physically or sexually, they are still living and have the capability, unlike those who are killed, to be rescued and have their lives restored. Maj. Rhonda Cornum was one of the first women to be taken as a prisoner of war. Cornum declares, “When you are a prisoner of war there are only three things. Whether they are going to interrogate me, beat me, abuse me, whatever they are going to do, is it going to kill me, is it going to disable me, and is it going to keep me here longer?” (Changing the face, 2004). She went to the front with her unit, and, at the time, it was not expected of women. Cornum does not claim to be hero and does not claim that she did anything significantly special: “I think all I did was demonstrate that women are just as likely to achieve those standards as anyone else” (Changing the face, 2004). By her demonstration of courageousness, the government had less justification for excluding women from these combat roles. Cornum states that after captives are rescued, “[they] fix [their] broken bones and [they] go back to work” (Changing the face, 2004). Women who get captured come out exactly like men who are captured; they are expected to allow their bodies to heal and are expected to return to work just as men are expected to do.

Not everyone looks at Cornum’s case as living proof that women are no different than men in a prisoner of war situation. Despite the mentality that some hold, declaring that women can make changes to better adapt for life as a direct combat soldier, many still fear that women will never be accepted in the position. According to Simons, “Respect does not guarantee

belonging. No matter how much respect a particular woman may garner, no matter how courageous or physically adept she might prove to be, not even the military's most unconventional combat units are unconventional enough to accept a female as a male" (2000, para. 2). With this idea being held, the United States will continue to be a patriarchal society, restricting the advancements possible for women in the workforce. Everyone does not hold this mindset; there are men who see no problem with females that enter combat units, as long as they expect no better treatment and can hold their own. The women fighting for the right to be accepted as combat soldiers are not asking to be accepted as men; they simply want to be accepted as human beings fighting for their country with as much right as the men beside them.

Another argument that is posed against women in direct combat is that the overall cohesion of all-male military units would be disrupted by the addition of women and that too much time would be required to regain cohesiveness. According to Simons, if one were to make personnel changes, such as adding females to combat units, the overall morale would "soar or plummet" (2000, para. 4). Rogan, agreeing with Simons, adds, "Many male soldiers see the encroaching women as part of the gradual erosion of the prestige and power of the old Army, which has fallen under the control of civilians" (1981, p. 18). Rogan notes that an officer once argued that many men would not take orders from women, which would set them up for failure (Rogan, 1981, p. 20). Refusing to take orders from a woman further exhibits that the United States is still living in a male-dominated society, contrary to what others would like to believe. The males' refusals to take orders from the females around them ultimately cause ineffectiveness; to be an effective unit, everyone must have equal communication amongst one another, no gender having more power than the other.

One then must question how this issue would be resolved and how much time would be required to ensure that the women successfully fit into the male units. The officer Rogan interviewed for his book claims that all of the issues with women being in combat take away “energy and time, [and] jeopardize the unit’s chance of success in battle” (Rogan, 1981, p. 21). MacKenzie combats that “Banning women from combat does not ensure military effectiveness” (2012, para. 3). One factor that can guarantee an increase of military effectiveness is having soldiers willing to lay their lives on the line to fight for their country. Male or female, as long as the individual person is willing to put forth the effort necessary to perform their assigned tasks, there should be no gender blaming for having ineffective units. There is also inadequate evidence that women actually do render a combat unit ineffective because of the ban on women only recently being lifted. Women are not the direct cause of military ineptitude; soldiers who do not withhold a high enough level of respect for their fellow comrades are probable causes of this ineffectiveness.

Many war veterans believe that including women in combat units destroys the minds of the male soldiers, who see war and violence as a journey into manhood. Rogan interviewed a war veteran, James Webb, and found that he, too, believed women disrupted the environment. He claimed, “The best soldiers are created in a harsh, cruel, and stressful environment that represents a rite of passage into manhood. The arrival of women has robbed these young men of their manhood in the interests of some ludicrous travesty of equal opportunity” (Rogan, 1981, p. 27). Conversely, according to Capt. Cynthia Mosley, a commander of an Army Combat support company, ““When the action starts every soldier does what they’re trained to do . . . Nobody cares whether you’re male or female. It’s just: ““can you do the job?””” (Holm, 1992, p. 463). Job capability should be priority when selecting soldiers for combat units. Granted there are

women who cannot perform the necessary jobs, but there are as many men who face the same hindrance. If women are capable of operating heavy artillery, of coping with gory violence daily, and of adapting to the necessary regimen of the military, then the United States has no right to deny them of any military positions.

Women's integration in combat units will change the way that many look at the military, specifically those who previously regarded the military as being sexist. Incorporating women in combat might give off "the idea that the military is a more normal and humane place than before, less dominated by images of male machismo," which will, in turn, attract more liberal males to the service (Quester, 1977, p. 91). Attracting more liberals than before will initiate a higher sense of patriotism for the country as whole and a higher level of support for the military than ever before, which is something many Americans take pride in having. Americans also recognize the freedoms that are attainable and the opportunities that are achievable should not be restricted or limited to one gender. By allowing women to engage in direct combat, despite the negative claims that men and women are physically and biologically different, the social construction that women do not naturally belong in combat, and the alleged claim that the cohesion in male units is disrupted, the United States is ultimately making itself seem more progressive (Quester, 1977, p. 91).

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