

# Women in the Military:

**How Improving Women's Experience Benefits Recruitment, Readiness, and Retention**

## PERSPECTIVE



American Security Project



## In this Report

Today, women comprise approximately 17 percent of military personnel and are a vital part of modern force structure. Women in the military provide numerous benefits to the Armed Forces, including the ability to provide an extra channel of intelligence gathering, reducing group think generated by male-dominated perspectives, and providing the means to better interact with women in foreign populations with differing cultural norms. Despite their importance, women face many structural and cultural challenges in their military experience. The ever-present issues of sexual harassment and assault, accessing medical care, and career advancement struggles are just some of the issues female service members face. The military must continuously work to improve conditions for women within its ranks, as women are vital to filling those ranks. Considering the recruitment and retention problems across branches, addressing the issues women face will help to improve capabilities and readiness.

The Department of Defense (DOD) needs to do a better job of protecting and promoting women in the military. While some progress has been made, such as moving the prosecution of sexual assault outside the chain of command, more can be done to address the gender disparities prevalent in the military.

## IN BRIEF

- With women having a 28 percent higher attrition rate, addressing challenges facing women in the military could help address recruitment and retention issues.
- Sexual assault is a key reason for women's attrition, which despite policy developments remains an issue that has led to a lack of trust in the military system.
- Despite becoming an increasing percentage of service members and even officers, women remain significantly underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership, only making up seven percent of admirals and generals.
- High fitness standards for non-combat positions disproportionately hold back women from promotion and advancement.
- Childcare for children of all service members is an increasing issue that is exacerbated for women by societal expectations.
- 44 percent of women face equipment fitment challenges which impairs them from effectively performing their duties.
- Female service members bring added intelligence gathering capability as they are able to interact with and inspect women in areas where those actions would be inappropriate for men.
- Today's military faces significant recruitment problems. Last year, the Army fell short of goals by 10,000 people and only met goals this year after significantly cutting those goals.
- Sexual trauma and gender discrimination lead to higher instance of poor mental health outcomes among female service members.

## About the Author

*Mia Smith is a recent graduate of George Washington University, where she studied international affairs with a focus on conflict resolution.*

## Introduction

The role of women in the military has evolved significantly over the past century, with their service becoming increasingly integral to modern military operations. Currently, women in the United States Armed Forces constitute approximately 17 percent of military personnel, as compared to 12 percent in the UK, 20 percent in Hungary, and 16 percent in France.<sup>1</sup> However, despite their indispensable contributions, women in the U.S. military continue to confront numerous structural and cultural barriers that impede their professional advancement and overall well-being. These challenges not only affect individual service members but also have broader implications for military capabilities and readiness.

At a time when the armed forces are grappling with recruitment and retention problems across branches, addressing the unique needs and concerns of women in the military assumes heightened significance. With attrition 28 percent higher for female service members than male, addressing these issues will improve retention and help with readiness problems.<sup>2</sup> Failure to adequately address these issues not only perpetuates gender disparities within the military but also undermines its effectiveness in fulfilling its mission objectives. Some significant progress has been made, including the establishment of a Gender Advisory Workforce across the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Military Departments and Services, and the Combatant Commands.<sup>3</sup> However, both the Department of Defense (DOD) and Veterans' Affairs (VA) must redouble their efforts to protect and promote the interests of women in the military by improving fitness standards, women's healthcare, and access to childcare, and by addressing women's promotion and military accountability.

## History

In the nearly 250 years of U.S. military history, women have been highly involved in the fight for American freedom. During the Revolutionary War, women accompanied male family members to join George Washington's army and help with camp maintenance, such as cooking meals for soldiers, helping the wounded, and cleaning and mending clothing.<sup>4</sup> They played a vital role in keeping the soldiers prepared for battle. A few women also participated directly in combat; Margaret Corbin fought in her husband's place after he died, and Deborah Sampson disguised herself as a man to fight until her gender was discovered after sustaining three bullet wounds.<sup>5</sup>

In the Civil War, women served as nurses on a much larger and more official scale. From Clara Barton and her founding of the Red Cross to Dorothea Dix serving as superintendent of U.S. Army Nurses, women were serving to aid injured soldiers.<sup>6</sup>

World War I marked the beginning of women's official placement within the military itself. In order to send more male soldiers overseas, women took over many clerical and communication roles. Around 12,000 women served stateside as non-commissioned officers or in non-combat roles.<sup>7</sup> Women also served as telephone and switchboard operators in France. Women were also near the front lines in their service to the Army Nurse Corps, which approximately 3,000 women joined in just over a year.<sup>8</sup>

During World War II, women began to serve in all branches of the military. A total of 350,000 women served in uniform in services such as the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, Women's Accepted Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, and the Coast Guard Women's Reserve.<sup>9</sup> Women served in many non-combat roles such as driving trucks, operating radio and telephone communications, ferrying airplanes, and much more. Women also continued to be vital to the Army Nurse Corps and the Navy Nurse Corps, often serving close to the front lines.

In 1948 President Truman signed the landmark Women's Armed Services Integration Act, which allowed women to serve as permanent members of all branches even in peacetime.<sup>10</sup> The Act was an achievement for women but did suffer from limitations such as a restricting the number of women to two percent of each branch, issuing discharge orders in cases of pregnancy, and limiting their command authority to solely units of women. President Truman also passed the Integration of the Armed Forces executive order, which allowed black women to participate more freely in the military.

By the Korean War in 1950-1953, about 120,000 women served active-duty in non-combat roles such as police officers and engineers.<sup>11</sup> During and after the Vietnam War, a few of the restrictions from the Women's Armed Services Integration Act were lifted to allow women's greater participation. During the Gulf-War, 40,000 women were deployed to combat zones, but not under combat roles.<sup>12</sup>

In 1994, President Clinton rescinded the "Risk Rule" allowing women to serve in all positions other than direct combat.<sup>13</sup> That limitation was lifted in 2013 by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, allowing women to serve in any position for which they qualify. By this point the combat exclusion had become relatively ineffective as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan rendered it harder to distinguish combat from non-combat. Even greater progress was achieved in the 2017 Women, Peace, and Security Act, which recognized women's essential role in conflict-prevention and as peace building actors.<sup>14</sup>

## Why Women are Vital to the Armed Forces

The importance of women's roles in the military cannot be overstated. In a changing world of combat operations, it is more important than ever to have a diverse military. Diversifying the armed forces varies the lived experiences and backgrounds and "[broadens] what is considered."<sup>15</sup>

Today's military faces the worst recruiting and retention problem since the end of the selective service.<sup>16</sup> The military is facing an unprecedented mission gap, with the Army last year falling short of recruitment goals by almost 10,000 people, and only meeting recruitment goals this year after significantly cutting those goals.<sup>17</sup> A number of causes contribute to the recruitment challenge: mental and physical health hurdles lingering from the COVID-19 pandemic, competition with the private sector, declining veteran presence in society, misconceptions about the risk of joining the military, and almost 77 percent of youth being unqualified for service.<sup>18</sup> With about 80 percent of recent service members coming from a family with at least one close relative having served in the military, the declining number of people in the service means there will likely be even fewer in the future.<sup>19</sup> Given the gravity of this problem, it is increasingly important to fill those gaps by recruiting women into the force and retaining them.

Similarly, the changing nature of war has resulted in a change in the needed skills of recruits. Today's wars are more complex than in the past and require better-educated fighters. Modern wars are fought with advanced technology operated and maintained by skilled professionals. However, skilled professionals are also in demand in the private sector and the resulting competition has reduced recruitment and retention rates. Women help address this issue by adding to the talent-pool for these positions that don't require high standards of physical fitness.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, women have a wide breadth of skills and experience, it behooves the DOD to use the people in their service efficiently by promoting and encouraging women's participation in the military.<sup>21</sup>

Women also serve important ground roles in peacekeeping or combat situations, and are often better at protecting the civilians under their mandate.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, there may be "situations where local women may not be able to speak freely to men or when men are around, a common occurrence during U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan."<sup>23</sup> Lioness Teams in Iraq, and Female Engagement Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, provided extra intel than would have been attainable with solely male soldiers deployed for intelligence gathering.<sup>24</sup> Local women often



have additional knowledge about their community and the terror groups operating in their area, and may only be able to discuss these things freely with other women, meaning that “female soldiers have thus been more effective in gathering intelligence, building trust, and treating the communities living there with more dignity.”<sup>25</sup> Women are also able to search or question other women suspected of terrorism, as these types of actions are often not culturally acceptable for men to perform; such was the original purpose of the Lioness Teams.<sup>26</sup> According to Retired Navy Captain Lory Manning, women also often see different issues than men when they are deployed in these circumstances, especially issues pertaining to local women that may get overlooked by male counterparts.<sup>27</sup>

Gender integration is also an issue for keeping pace with our enemies: as an increasing number of suicide bombers are women, counter-terror strategies also need to incorporate women. Terror groups like Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab have increased their use of women as suicide bombers because they have more access to markets and are less likely to be searched at checkpoints.<sup>28</sup> In fighting these groups, it is important for the U.S. to have women and gender experts on its team to address the impact of female terrorists.

The military is also a prime example for forward progress in the country. As seen in the example of racial integration, the military became fully integrated before desegregation in much of the rest of the country. In 1946, President Harry Truman signed an executive order to integrate the military after seeing the continued persecution of black service members after their return from service.<sup>29</sup> By 1954, the military was fully integrated, a decade ahead of the Civil Rights Act. In this manner, the military has often served as a pioneer for equalizing measures in society and could continue to be so for women’s advancement to higher levels in their careers.



*Female U.S. Army Soldier searches an Iraqi woman during a food and water distribution mission in Kamaliya, Iraq. U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 2nd Class John T. Parker*

## Issues Challenging the Recruitment and Retention of Women

### Sexual Harassment and Assault

#### Prevalence

The issue of sexual assault and harassment in the military is not new, from informal hazing to abuse by officers, the issue remains widespread despite decades-old zero-tolerance policies, though exact numbers are difficult to pinpoint because of underreporting.<sup>30</sup> The lowest pay grades of enlisted active-duty women are the most at risk for sexual assault, often because some female officers are better protected by their ranks and thus less likely to be assaulted.<sup>31</sup> One study by the RAND Corporation found that in the service, lifetime sexual assault experience was around 18 percent for women and 3 percent for men, with sexual assault against men being most common as a form of sexualized hazing.<sup>32</sup>

Sexual assault is more likely in units with fewer women or units stationed in isolated or remote areas.<sup>33</sup> A DOD report found that assault was most often committed by a peer of equivalent rank or slightly higher rank to the victim.<sup>34</sup> In either case, victims may leave the military early to avoid further assault or because of trauma associated with the assault, leading sexual assault to be one of the main reasons for women’s 28 percent higher attrition rate.<sup>35</sup>

## Reporting

As previously mentioned, underreporting of sexual harassment and assault remains an issue in the military. This leads to lower rates on official reports and an under-emphasis of these issues. There are several reasons why military personnel do not report their experiences of sexual harassment and assault.

There is a lack of trust in the military system to try, convict, and punish perpetrators of these crimes.<sup>36</sup> This lack of trust seems to be well-founded as conviction rates for rape and other sexual crimes are much lower than for other violent crimes.<sup>37</sup> In prior years, this was because investigation of these crimes was up to the discretion of the supervising officer. However, officers had significant incentives not to investigate, including having someone under their command convicted.<sup>38</sup>

Another common reason for underreporting is fear of retaliation against the reporter. From one study in 2015, about two-thirds of women who reported sexual assault that year faced significant retaliation, social or professional, in response.<sup>39</sup> Retaliation can take the form of more violence, such as further assault either by the perpetrator or the perpetrator's friends. Retaliation is also often implicitly legitimized through an informal socialization process which trivializes sexual assault and harassment.<sup>40</sup>

In order to avoid retaliation, the military has in place an Expedited Transfer policy to allow victims of sexual assault to transfer out of the situation they were assaulted in. However, a recent report by the Inspector General (IG) concluded that the military is not processing over 50 percent of these transfer requests in the required time frame.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the military services were found not to maintain complete data on the transfers, making oversight difficult to accomplish.<sup>42</sup>

## Culture

The culture within the military plays a substantial role in perpetuating instances of sexual harassment and assault. This often takes the form of “formal and informal socialization practices in the military, including sexualized hazing and sexual harassment, [which] create a permissive environment and encourage sexual assault.”<sup>43</sup> In the hyper-masculinized culture of the military, association with femininity or transgressing military gender norms is often denigrated or punished.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, the formal socialization process continues to reproduce a hyper-masculinized environment which undermines policies to prevent harassment and assault.<sup>45</sup> The policies are also further undermined by officers who perpetrate sexual harassment or assault, which offers implicit endorsement to their subordinates. A problematic incentive structure, as previously discussed, “undercuts efforts to end the de facto tolerance of sexual abuse by many officers.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, training has relied on gender stereotypes to inspire success in new recruits. This has taken the form of calling recruits “ladies” or “fags” as a derogation.<sup>47</sup>

## Readiness Effects

Aside from being criminal acts, the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault has negative effects on military readiness. From causing increased health risks to decreased retention and recruitment, these issues affect the military's preparedness. Around 8,000 military personnel per year are lost due to sexual assault.<sup>48</sup> Stories and perceptions of the military as a dangerous place for women in regards to sexual harassment and assault negatively impact civilians' desire to join the military. In a time when the military is struggling to meet recruitment and retention goals it is more important than ever to address these issues to encourage more people to join the military who would otherwise avoid it because of these issues.

## **Military Justice Reform**

In 2023, the DOD took an important step in addressing sexual assault cases by moving the prosecution of such cases from the chain of command to a new Offices of Special Trial Counsel.<sup>49</sup> This new system will put independent lawyers in charge of the prosecution.<sup>50</sup> Senator Kirsten Gillibrand has been advocating for this change for years, describing how it will vastly improve accountability for sexual assault and harassment cases. This act took effect at the end of 2023 and data on how it is affecting sexual assault and harassment cases is not yet available.<sup>51</sup>

## **Women's Health**

### **Menstrual Health**

Though there hasn't been a comprehensive report on female soldier readiness since 2010, the 2010 Army Guide to Female Soldier Readiness highlights several key issues including menstrual health maintenance and care during deployment and service.<sup>52</sup> The guide highly recommends that menstruating soldiers in the field are at least provided daily access to a basic bathing facility. This can be as simple as a private place with drainage, such as a small tent with "improvised" flooring and does not require running water. Additionally, women should be provided adequate time for urination and hydration as a preventative measure against UTIs.<sup>53</sup> Female soldiers are instructed to pack necessary cleaning and menstrual care products for up to three months depending on the situation, but otherwise, non-menstruating soldiers can be treated largely the same as men. The report describes how the public/community health nursing section can provide training for female health service issues during deployment.<sup>54</sup>

The military also encourages female soldiers to utilize menstrual suppression through hormonal birth control.<sup>55</sup> These contraceptives are also utilized to combat unintended pregnancies during military service.<sup>56</sup> A report showed about 86 percent of female service members surveyed were interested in menstrual suppression, but were not aware of their available options, supporting the military's need for contraceptive education.<sup>57</sup>

### **Mental Health**

Gender-based discrimination is associated with increased PTSD, depression, and anxiety.<sup>58</sup> This has led to higher suicide attempt rates and higher prevalence of suicidal thought, as well as higher rates of PTSD after deployment injuries among female service members as compared with their male counterparts.<sup>59</sup> These mental health effects pose key readiness challenges as those with such illnesses are less prepared for their jobs—a serious concern in the high-stakes environment of the military.

Additionally, women who experience sexual harassment or assault are more prone to depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance use, and other poor health outcomes.<sup>60</sup> Sexual trauma is also associated with increased suicide risk. These negative health outcomes lead to lower preparedness of the troops affected and are damaging to group morale. A depressed or anxious soldier is not as effective in their position as a healthy soldier.

### **Pregnancy and Post-partum**

The military has made several improvements in pregnancy, post-partum, and parenthood resources and training. The Army increased the time for meeting height and weight standards after birth from six to twelve months.<sup>61</sup> Birthparents (those that physically give birth) are also now deferred or excused from continuous duty events exceeding one normal day shift for one year after the birth.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, convalescent leave is given for the parents in situations of live birth, stillbirth, or miscarriage.<sup>63</sup>

There are also new programs to help keep pregnant and postpartum parents physically fit in a safe manner, so that they can meet fitness requirements when they return to duty.<sup>64</sup> The program also offers resources to new parents, like diapers and formula.

## Difficulties in Promotion and Advancement

### Leadership Challenges

Despite increasing participation of women in the military, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions. Only about 7 percent of generals and admirals are women, compared to 19 percent of all officers, and women are still a minority in service academies—an often important steppingstone to becoming an officer.<sup>65</sup> A significant reason for the disparity in leadership is the higher rate of attrition for female service members, without serving long enough, women are often ineligible to compete for higher ranks.<sup>66</sup> For example, female army physicians often leave service after their commitment is filled.<sup>67</sup>

Women face additional challenges to attaining leadership due to the military’s masculine culture. Women are forced to adapt to this culture, which is often very difficult, leads to delays in their careers, and creates a homogenous culture rather than a diverse one.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, women are often given fewer opportunities to show or gain leadership skills and male leaders are often more reluctant to mentor female subordinates than male subordinates.<sup>69</sup>



Official photo of Gen. Ann E. Dunwoody, U.S. Army Materiel Command commanding general, first female four star general.

Female leaders face difficulties in their leadership style as well. There is a “double bind” for female leaders: if they act too masculine, they are judged as abrasive and bossy, while if they act too feminine, they are not respected.<sup>70</sup> In one study conducted by Catalyst, 52 percent of respondents described female leaders as “too soft,” “too hard” or both.<sup>71</sup> Women are also socialized to watch their tone so as to not be too abrasive or cold and to not promote themselves for advancement.<sup>72</sup> The pervasive sexism in the military also allows some men to question female leaders despite the clear command structure.<sup>73</sup> This military sexism takes many forms: female service members’ work is often undervalued, they often report working twice as hard, and exclusion from the “old boys club” culture.<sup>74</sup>

Another issue which has historically hindered women’s opportunities for advancement was the exclusion from combat positions. While this exclusion was removed ten years ago, its impact is still felt by the many women who were held back in their careers because of it. Combat experience is prioritized in promotion decisions, which for many years left women out of many leadership positions.<sup>75</sup> However, during the Gulf Wars, because of modern warfare strategies, women were often serving in what amounted to be combat roles, but because of the exclusion rule were not getting adequately trained or compensated for their work. For example, women on Lioness Teams and Female Engagement Teams were sent to do counter-insurgency work but received only a few days training. Furthermore, women’s experiences in these positions were not being considered during promotion for positions that required combat experience.<sup>76</sup>

### Fitness

Physical differences between men and women have historically been a major part of the argument against women’s participation in the military, especially in combat and in leadership. However, women in every branch are proving themselves capable of succeeding at even the highest physical fitness tests, such as for the Green Berets.<sup>77</sup>



Despite some women excelling at these most difficult tests, many women are unfairly failed in other fitness tests that are not relevant to their duties. For non-combat positions that don't require such high levels of physical fitness to perform the necessary work, it is unfair to withhold promotion and advancement based on combat standards that disproportionately fail women. Considering this, gender-neutral combat fitness tests fail healthy women at a higher rate than healthy men. In 2021, a review of the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) found women failed at 44 percent, while men only failed at seven percent.<sup>78</sup> The ACFT was halted by Congress for review in 2021, but after making some changes based on the RAND Corporation's findings, along with soldiers' experience, the ACFT has been reinstated.<sup>79</sup>

In a 2018 survey, 70 percent of female soldiers responded that they were not receiving additional training where needed and thus were not passing tasks within the test as well, additionally 53 percent responded that their chain of command would not support them in seeking additional training.<sup>80</sup> This is especially important as increased training for women was shown to decrease the risk of injury.<sup>81</sup> The same survey found that 40 percent of male respondents believed that fitness standards would be lowered for women, despite seeing women that were passing at the same standard.<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, weight standards have been inconsistent and not reflective of newer health studies. One practice that is consistently disadvantaging, is the practice of waist taping. This is the practice of measuring the circumference of the waist to determine body fat composition. However, it consistently overestimates body fat composition and does not take into account differences in hip sizes of women of different racial backgrounds.<sup>83</sup> The Air Force has discontinued this practice as it is extremely outdated, but the other branches continue to utilize it.<sup>84</sup>

A further fitness issue arises from pregnancy and postpartum fitness standards. Most women time pregnancies around deployment but are often not given enough time to recover before returning to strenuous physical activity.<sup>85</sup> For women in non-combat positions, more time should be allowed for recovery. After childbirth, women score lower than their pre-pregnancy levels on fitness tests for up to two and a half years as their bodies return to normal.<sup>86</sup> However, military women are often pressured to resume rigorous exercise after birth, which can result in injuries if resumed without sufficient recovery time.<sup>87</sup> Childbirth can also bring body type changes that are not accounted for in weight standards. The issue is also prevalent in physical fitness testing after a miscarriage, as women are not given enough time to emotionally and physically recover from the adjustment.<sup>88</sup>

## Family Life Challenges

A routinely cited reason for the higher female attrition or slower advancement than their male peers is due to family life challenges.

Childcare is an increasing challenge due to the rising costs and limited availability.<sup>89</sup> Service members who work 24-hour shifts or who are deployed overseas for long periods, find taking care of their families difficult.<sup>90</sup> The challenge is exacerbated for women as society often places the burden on women to care for children. The issue is even more prevalent in dual-military families, where both parents are in the service.<sup>91</sup> Bringing children on deployments may not always be possible, and non-traditional work hours make finding childcare difficult.

This challenge was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which further reduced availability and increased costs. The DOD has attempted to address this issue by opening the



*Spc. Shatyra Reed, a public affairs mass communication specialist with the 22nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, XVIII Airborne Corps Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion, and her daughter Amore Cox. U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Hubert D. Delany III.*

largest employer-sponsored childcare program in the U.S.<sup>92</sup> However, this program remains limited, leaving about 22 percent of families without childcare and some 11,000 children remaining on waiting lists for on-base childcare services.<sup>93</sup>

In a 2019 Rand Corporation study, female service members voiced concerns about effects of military life on their personal life as well, an issue which is not unique to women, but disproportionately affects them. Female service members also showed concerns about the effect of frequent moves on civilian spouses' careers and about being stationed in different locations from military spouses.<sup>94</sup> Female service members were also concerned about the effects of long deployments, transfers, and overnight work schedules on their children, and this was even more of a concern among female service members in a dual-military marriage.<sup>95</sup>

Women also often face discrimination for breastfeeding. The same RAND study showed that women "raised concerns about a lack of breastfeeding support, including a lack of appropriate facilities and the reluctance of some commanders to allow proper breaks for pumping breast milk."<sup>96</sup>

Personal and family life challenges are of increasing importance to address in today's military environment because of today's recruitment challenges. With a long-term view of these recruiting challenges, it's important to consider that since new recruits so often come from military families, it is subsequently important to promote policies that improve family life so that their children will be more interested in joining the service.<sup>97</sup>

## Stereotypes

Female service members also face advancement challenges from the stereotypes they are constantly working to overcome. Many men in the service, "primarily among male senior NCOs and male company grade officers," don't believe women have a place in their ranks; they see their female peers as lowering the fitness standards and there only to look for husbands, not to serve their country.<sup>98</sup> This leads to women feeling they must prove their position daily.<sup>99</sup> They also face some of the same issues civilian women face, including not being heard or having men repeat their ideas as their own without receiving credit.<sup>100</sup> The constant need for women leaders to prove themselves capable of their position can be difficult, "it wears on you", especially in positions where women are still very new additions.<sup>101</sup>

## Equipment Challenges

44 percent of women face equipment fitting challenges.<sup>102</sup> The issues of women's uniforms, clothing, and equipment, such as body armor, are some of the most direct examples of gender disparities in the military.



*U.S. Army Spc. Micah Redenbaugh, a supply specialist assigned to the 170th Support Maintenance Company, fires at her target. U.S. Army National Guard photo by 1st Lt. Titus Firmin*

All soldiers receive an initial clothing stipend to cover the costs of regulation clothing. After this initial stipend, soldiers must pay out-of-pocket for any remaining clothing purchases.<sup>103</sup> Female soldiers receive a slightly higher stipend to account for extra clothing costs, however this stipend actually covers a lower percentage of women's costs and they end up paying more out-of-pocket than their male peers.<sup>104</sup> In what is commonly referred to as the "pink tax" in other contexts, women's uniforms are more expensive than men's uniforms.<sup>105</sup>

Ill-fitting equipment is also a readiness issue as it impairs soldiers' abilities to effectively perform their duties. Equipment cited as not fitting properly "include but are not

limited to body armor, the Advanced Combat Helmet (ACH), the MOLLE ruck system, gloves, and coveralls.”<sup>106</sup> This is especially key in aviation roles as ill-fitting equipment has contributed to stagnating numbers of women in aviation.<sup>107</sup> The most common issue is lack of small sizing options. Oversized equipment impairs movement and the ability to shoot and communicate effectively. Furthermore, the proportionately heavier gear leads to higher instance of joint pain in female veterans.<sup>108</sup> This is a key readiness issue not just for women, but for smaller stature men who do not fit the standard sizes given by the military.

Development of new pieces to address fit issues is underway. A new military issue supportive bra was developed in 2022.<sup>109</sup> New smaller and lighter body armor is being adopted for women and smaller male soldiers, including three additional smaller size options.<sup>110</sup> This new body armor includes added features to accommodate anatomical differences, for example it has coverage of the side bust area, a sweep in the waist, and a shorter arm length.<sup>111</sup>

## Recommendations

### 1. Correct fitness standards and training to be equitable for women.

For combat positions, women need to be provided reasonably sufficient training to enable them to pass fitness tests that meet the standards required for combat. For non-combat positions, instead of a high, combat-based fitness standard that is increasingly unmeetable as overweight and obesity increases, a hierarchy of fitness standards appropriate for each job should be utilized.<sup>112</sup>

### 2. Expand childcare support programs.

A frequently cited issue of retention for both female and male service members, was childcare. The on-base programs sponsored by the DOD are successful but can't keep up with demand.<sup>113</sup> Expanding this program would help allow service members to continue their careers after starting their families.

### 3. Incorporate more women into senior ranks.

Ensuring gender equality in the military can only be accomplished if they are represented at all levels across the branches. Encourage women's training and mentoring and erase informal and formal socialization processes that encourage harassment. Reconsider combat experience as a major consideration in advancement, where appropriate. Increase the opportunities for women to show and gain leadership skills to promote women's advancement.

### 4. Increase accountability at all levels.

The recent move of several crimes to an Office of Special Trial Council will help to increase accountability by removing prosecution from the chain of command and thus some of the incentives against accountability. However, this new move needs support from the upper levels of the military to encourage its use. Much of the military culture is top-down, and having explicit support from senior levels, not just for appearances, will help to ensure the effectiveness of this reform. This may include increased gender-sensitive training programs so that senior level officers are more aware of these and other issues.

### 5. Address mental health issues in service members and veterans.

Many service members and veterans suffer from various mental illnesses that go under-treated in U.S. healthcare. Women face additional risks to mental health from sexual trauma and gender discrimination. Improving mental health treatment for service members to address gender related issues is important to aid retention of women in the military.

## 6. Continue improving equipment designs.

The military has now fully incorporated women into its ranks. In order to help them serve at their maximum capacity, the equipment they use needs to be designed for them. While some progress is being made, this is a continual issue that needs to be fully addressed to allow women to meet their potential.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Department of Defense Releases Annual Demographics Report — Upward Trend in Number of Women Serving Continues.” U.S. Department of Defense, December 14, 2022.

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<sup>2</sup> United States Government Accountability Office (GAO). “FEMALE ACTIVE- DUTY PERSONNEL Guidance and Plans Needed for Recruitment and Retention Efforts Report to Congressional Committees United States Government Accountability Office,” 2020. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/707037.pdf>. p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “DoD Commends Release of 2023 Women, Peace, and Security Strategy and National Action Plan,” November 20, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3595108/dod-commends-release-of-2023-women-peace-and-security-strategy-and-national-act/>.

<sup>4</sup> DeSimone, Danielle. “Over 200 Years of Service: The History of Women in the U.S. Military.” United Service Organizations, June 11, 2021. <https://www.uso.org/stories/3005-over-200-years-of-service-the-history-of-women-in-the-us-military>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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**To communicate our vision for security in the 21st century by developing and sharing new ideas and critical analyses on the most important national security issues of our time;**

**To forge a bipartisan consensus on a new national security strategy that will restore America's leadership and ensure our security;**

**To raise the American public's understanding of critical national security issues through direct engagement and dialogue.**



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