



“In Iraq, We Were Never Neutral”: Exploring the Effectiveness of “Gender-Neutral” Standards in a Gendered War

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
WOMEN OF THE IRAQ
WAR

RESEARCH

KYLEANNE HUNTER 

VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

This article begins with a brief review of the literature on the expansion of military occupational opportunities for women in the United States (US) Armed Forces. To date, cognitive-institutional reinforcement and the relationship between warfighting and policy making has allowed the military to staunchly maintain its masculinized character. Women have been expected to conform to these gender norms in a masculinized environment. However, the Iraq War presented an interestingly juxtaposed case due to the gendered nature of the insurgency. Women in uniform were increasingly called upon and required to act “as women” to meet tactical and strategic objectives. Their actions call into question the overall masculine character of warfighting. Data from focus groups and interviews further advance the position that women in the military are put into increasingly contradictory positions. This is a byproduct of the informal gendered realities of war and the formal focus on gender-neutrality in training and standards. For many women serving, this confusion of gendered expectations can be distracting from the accomplishment of primary duties, which adversely impacts women’s recruitment, retention, and reintegration into civilian life. This article provides a discussion on what this lack of gender clarity means for military recruitment, retention, and integration of women.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Kyleanne Hunter

United States Air Force
Academy, US

kyleanne.hunter@afacademy.af.edu

KEYWORDS:

Iraq; Gender Integration; Policy; Women

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Hunter, K. (2021). “In Iraq, We Were Never Neutral”: Exploring the Effectiveness of “Gender-Neutral” Standards in a Gendered War. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(2), pp. 6–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i2.265>

BACKGROUND

Since 2003, approximately a quarter of a million United States (US) women service members have deployed to Iraq (Wenger et al., 2018). From the American Revolution to present day military actions around the world, women have been participating as combatants and in support functions during war. In the case of the Iraq War (2003–2011), subsequent training operations (2011–present), and intervention to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (2013–present), women’s participation has been unprecedented not only for the sheer number of women serving, but the diversity of jobs they hold. From combat aviation to convoy commanders and security forces, Iraq has been the site of the most large-scale deployments of women in US military history.¹ In its opening years, the war in Iraq was the first combat test for women in positions that had been newly opened in the 1990s. At the time of the Iraq invasion, women were serving in every job they were legally allowed to have,² and stories of women’s courage, heroism, and ability to excel were shared in popular news media and in military training. If the initial years of combat in Iraq were a test of women’s abilities, then they certainly passed.

In addition to women’s service in conventional military occupational specialties, a specific gendered mission emerged during the war in Iraq. As the military mission progressed from a conventional war to a counterinsurgency aimed at ensuring favorable conditions for a future Iraq, it became evident that engagement with Iraqi women at the tactical level was essential (Dyvik, 2017; Khalili, 2011). Local women were a vital source of human intelligence (HUMINT), as well as a key center of gravity for winning hearts and minds. However, cultural sensitivities made it virtually impossible for all-male infantry units to engage with Iraqi women. It became evident that specialty teams of women would be needed to engage with the Iraqi female population.

This challenge was met through the formation of Lioness Teams—teams of women Marines and soldiers—who were augmented to infantry units and engaged with local Iraqi women. Lioness Teams became combat proven and were an essential force multiplier in Iraq (Beals, 2010), and they set the stage for the Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan and the more broadly implemented Cultural Support Teams (CST). These teams had a specific gendered mission—to engage *as women* with the local population in order to root out insurgents and fortify communities against violence recidivism. While in these teams women were expected to be combat ready, they were also encouraged to act in a “feminine” manner. Once engaging with local women, they were told to take their helmets off and let

their hair down, and they were encouraged to talk about their families and relate to Iraqi women on a personal level.

Though proven as a force multiplier, legal restrictions led to Lioness Teams being created and used in an *ad hoc* manner. They were comprised of women from a variety of different military occupational specialties (MOS) who were already in-country (Aranda, 2008; Latty, 2009). To circumvent legal restrictions, women were assigned to infantry units for no more than 30 days at a time. They received 5–10 days of training on search techniques and their weapons and 3 days of turnover with the previous team.

Women’s service in roles such as these was used as partial justification for the removal of the so-called women in combat exclusion policy (Alvarez, 2009; Lemmon, 2015). Indeed, by the time that the combat exclusion policy was removed by then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, women had shown that they were not only effective but also necessary for combat operations. The combat exclusion policy, however, meant that they often did not receive adequate training, and the 30-day rotation hindered the development of meaningful unit cohesion and institutionalized practices. Removing the restriction would allow women to be integrated more fully into ground combat units, reaping the benefits of women’s service in the increasingly gendered conflict being fought.

The call to change personnel policy during an active conflict, and for a uniquely gendered reason, represents a novel situation. Historically, policy decisions that have expended women’s service have fit into one of two molds: (a) to increase the eligible pool of bodies needed to meet force strength (Segal, 1995), or (b) to give women more opportunity for career progression within the military (Kamarck, 2016; MacKenzie, 2015). In the case of the former, gender is not a driving force for expanding opportunities. Whether “free a man to fight” or meeting the needs of an all-volunteer force, women were seen as stand-ins for men; they were needed to do a job with little attention paid to their gender as necessary for mission accomplishment. In the latter, women’s service is seen as a human right or social justice issue, an advancement of women’s empowerment not necessarily connected to military mission accomplishment. The net result of both is that when women’s roles in the military are expanded, women are expected to conform to the standards and culture that existed prior to them joining. In short, women adapt to male standards and a masculine culture. Historically, this *modus operandi* worked because warfighting remained a masculine enterprise.

Yet, what happens when policies expanding opportunities for women are made in the midst of local-level, gendered warfighting? This article explores the tension that

developed as the result of the women in combat exclusion policy being removed against the backdrop of such a conflict. Unlike previous conflicts, women who served in Iraq (and Afghanistan) had a very gendered role, and the Services acknowledged that women were specifically needed for operational success (Hunter, 2015). However, despite this very gendered nature of the ongoing combat operations, the removal of the ban was deliberately gender-neutral. Rather than making the gendered nature of modern warfare the centerpiece for the removal of the ban, the Services followed historical examples of when previously closed positions were opened to women—setting “gender-neutral” standards and expecting women to conform to the preexisting culture and norms. Against the backdrop of a gendered conflict, the Services took pride in assuring both the public and service members that gender-neutrality was central to their Gender Integration Plans.³ On the one hand, the formality presented a narrative of equality, but on the other, informal practices advanced certain gender expectations in certain duties and roles.

The intersection of a deeply gendered conflict with gender-neutral standards resulted in unintended consequences for service members. Through focus groups and interviews of women who served in gendered operations in Iraq and then experienced the gender-neutral emphasis of the removal of the combat exclusion policy, it seems apparent that confusion about their military service emerged. I use the term “confusion” intentionally to discuss these findings, because underlying the experiences women had was a sense of uncertainty about what the removal of the ban meant. Much scholarship exists about the *tension* women in the military feel between their personal identity and the masculine expectations of the military. While such formal and informal tensions are real, there was no underlying confusion about the masculine nature of warfare or the masculine expectations placed on individual service women. The gendered nature of warfare that was occurring when the women in combat ban was removed, opened space for uncertainty and confusion to emerge above and beyond the previously present contradictions.

This confusion takes three forms. First, as a policy confusion. The standards set forth in the gender integration implementation plans often failed to match the reality individual service members experienced when engaged in combat operations. This most often manifested in misunderstandings about physical fitness and occupational standards, resulting in a backlash against women’s military service and a diminishing of their roles. Second, there exists confusion about the communication surrounding the policy. The lack of formal, top-down communication resulted in social media and rumor mills generating misleading narratives, thereby undermining the value and contributions

of women’s military service. Finally, there is confusion about women’s place in the military. This is manifested through social isolation and questions about the “right” type of service. For women that have not deployed but are integrating into positions made available after the removal of the combat exclusion ban, this confusion is manifested through a perceived misunderstanding from top-down emphasis, both on gender-neutral service and celebration of the women heroes who served in very gendered ways in Iraq. The result of this confusion is a negative impact on women’s military recruitment and retention.

WOMEN’S WARTIME PARTICIPATION AND RESULTING POLICY CHANGES

Women’s military participation and the tension between femininity and military service has been a topic of much scholarly study. An historically masculine enterprise, women in the military have been seen as an anomaly, aberration, and/or perceived as mythic heroes (Goldstein, 2001; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). As women have joined the military, they have been expected to conform to the enterprise of hyper-masculinity, resulting in tensions between civilian womanhood and military machismo. The masculine character of war—and by extension the military—has been codified in the military’s personnel policies. Policies that have codified women’s service have largely been a response to one of two pressures. First, they have been a response to either changing demographics or exceptional circumstances that recognize the need for women to ensure adequate force strength (Segal, 1995). Whether it was because there simply were not enough men to serve both in combat and military support roles (Meyer, 1994), men were more likely to prefer working in the civilian sector (Eulriet, 2012), or changes in educational and occupational preferences (Armor & Gilroy, 2010), the military has increasingly had to rely on women to meet recruiting goals. Second, there has been increased pressure from outside the military to expand professional opportunities for women. Rather than focus on the warfighting aspect of military service, the military is seen as a profession, and social progressivism movements have focused on eliminating formal barriers to women being able to have a meaningful career in military service (Carreiras, 2009).

Whether forced by operational needs or external social pressures, expanding opportunities for women has not ceased the military’s traditional masculine character. The nature of warfare has been such that women have been expected to conform to the historically masculine military ideals and culture and conform to the status quo (Carreiras, 2009; Goldstein, 2001). Gender roles are systemically integrated to both the performance of warfare and the

psychology of a society with a standing military. Virtually every society is organized in such a way that men are the primary (and often only) warfighters, and women are expected to carry out domestic tasks (Goldstein, 2001); the US is no exception. If war is about killing and killing is a man's job, the military is antithetical to the caregiving and nurturing role of women in society. For women to join, they must shed their feminine trappings and adopt the character of a warrior. Women are forced to adopt dual identities, with clear lines drawn between when it is acceptable to be a woman and when it is necessary to be a hyper-hegemonic, masculine war fighter (Doan & Portillo, 2017).

In the US, the military plays a prominent role in society. This results in a sociopolitical reinforcing mechanism whereby policy and practice work together to fortify gender roles (Hunter & Best, 2020). Hunter and Best (2020) refer to this phenomenon as cognitive institutional reinforcement—the notion that social beliefs about gender are embedded into formal institutions. This means that individuals who enter the military are not only expected to act in a masculine way and adopt traditionally masculine characteristics, but institutional policy is made in such a way as to formally reinforce masculine norms. Indeed, as a retired general noted when pushing back against the rapid changes to personnel policies expanding opportunities to women in the 1990s, “the major social value of a military society is a warrior image, particularly a masculine warrior image” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 44). These informal expectations are deeply rooted in informal personnel practices and expectations of service members.

Cognitive institutional reinforcement is prominent in the military because during most periods of personnel policy expansion, war has remained fundamentally about killing. The historical example of World War II illustrates this. Nearly half a million women mobilized as part of the World War II support effort (Yellin, 2010). These women were pivotal to the war, yet they held positions that largely conformed to what was deemed “appropriate” for their gender (Meyer, 1994). Even when breaking norms about women working outside the home, they did not challenge the idea that men were the warrior class and women were the domestic workers (Goldin, 1991).⁴ Women held roles in factories, worked as nurses, and even flew planes to the European front. Yet it was very clearly delineated that they did not participate in direct combat operations.

Policies regarding women's military service reinforced the idea that combat was a man's world. The Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 formalized recognition of women who remained in military service after World War II. Though it allowed women to serve in the military, it put limitations on the number of women in the service

(no more than 2% of total force strength) and the ratio between officer and enlisted (no more than 1:10). These limitations reinforced the idea that women's service should be the exception, rather than the rule. As Megan MacKenzie (2015) notes, the codified restrictions of the Act were not a response to any specific aspect of women's service that was troublesome, but an attempt by policy makers to help the country “return to normal” after the war.

The tension between women's identity and military service can be seen almost immediately after the passage of the Act. As women began to enter military service in earnest, questions were raised about their intentions, motivations, capabilities, and character (Herbert, 1998). As the decades progressed, and women's roles expanded, the continued questions led to military women reporting feeling a tension about their identity with regards to military service (Brown, 2012).

Figure 1 shows the timeline of key personnel policy legislation concerning women's opportunities in the military. Until the 1990s, expanded opportunities for women were mostly confined to support roles. As the post-World War II military transitioned from a conscription force to fight a total war to a professional standing military, the need for support functions grew, and with them more opportunities for women (Eulriet, 2012). Support roles—from logistics to piloting aircraft—afforded women opportunities to make careers out of military service without challenging the masculine character of warfighting or violence. Throughout this period, women served in a verity of conflicts, including Korea, Vietnam, Bosnia, and the First Gulf War. In all instances, the conduct of war remained largely conventional. The emphasis of military action was on killing the enemy to achieve victory.⁵

Even in support roles, women were socialized into the military, and the emphasis remained on adhering to masculine standards in performance and cultural attitudes. The demands of warfighting created a tension between individual feminine identity and the way in which the military expected jobs to be done. This tension was recognized as the “price of doing business” (Herbert, 1998), and women were expected to tolerate certain behaviors and actions by men because they were working in a male-dominated environment. Women entering the military consciously downplayed any feminine characteristics in favor of adopting masculine ones. The masculine stereotype is so engrained in military culture that women felt it was a matter of professional survival to not publicly display any characteristics that may be perceived as feminine (Archer, 2013). For example, Emerald Archer (2013) shows how this has had a negative impact on the perceptions of women's abilities and reinforced a cultural belief that women were not “good enough” until they learned to act like men.

1948	The Women’s Armed Services Integration Act of 1948.
1951	The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) created.
1967	Legal provisions restriction number of women and rack achievement repealed.
1969	Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps (AFROTC) opens to women.
1971	Law to end the draft signed.
1972	Army and Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) opened to women.
1973	Draft officially disbanded.
1976	Women admitted to Service Academies.
1978	Coast Guard opens all assignments to women. The Women’s Army Corps (WAC) is disestablished.
1991	Congress repeals the law banning women from combat aviation.
1993	Congress repeals law prohibiting women from duty on combat ships.
2010	Reversal of Navy policy that bars women from submarines.
2013	Repeal of Combat Exclusion Policy announced.
2015	Repeal of the Combat Exclusion Policy implemented.
2020	Congress mandates Marine Corps Recruit Training be integrated.

Figure 1 Policy Changes Involving Women in The Military.

Policy continued to reinforce this culture. In addition to maintaining a focus on combat readiness that emphasized violence and killing as the primary mission set of the military (Hunter, 2019), personnel policy was crafted to try and make women act more like men. From a physical standpoint, women were perceived as small men with too much body fat, so height and weight standards were created to force women into often unnaturally body fat percentages with the hopes that it would result in them performing more like men (Friedl, 2012).

The cognitive institutional reinforcement of masculinity in the military was possible because warfighting—the primary mission of the military—remained in step with the traditional gendered divisions of masculine warriors and feminine domestics. While women experienced an identity tension as a result, it was a known feature of military service. Though cognitive institutional reinforcement may have harmed women, there was little confusion that it existed. Women expected to face this tension when they joined the military.

The war in Iraq introduced a particularly gendered aspect to warfighting that would challenge the status

quo of an ideal warrior. Women were needed not just to fill the ranks, but also to engage in specific actions that only they could accomplish. During counterinsurgency activities in Iraq, for example, women were expected to act as women, and rather than downplay their gender, use their femininity to help with the fight. It is against this backdrop of gendered warfare that the women in combat exclusion policy was rescinded. However, as warfighting became increasingly gendered, the policy was rescinded in a way that was consistent with the traditional gendered ideals. This created an unprecedented situation and both policy and social confusion that transcends the traditional gendered tension.

THE REPEAL OF THE WOMEN IN COMBAT EXCLUSION: GENDER-NEUTRAL SOLUTION TO A GENDERED PROBLEM

The removal of the combat exclusion policy was met with much praise from proponents of women’s service, including infantry officers who had seen the benefit of female service in Iraq (Ackerman, 2015; Schogol, 2019). However, the implementation of the removal had unintended

consequences. As noted above, the expansion of military roles for women has historically been done in a way that forced females to conform to the masculine status quo in order to succeed. When the Services implemented their post-ban gender integration plans, they carried on many of these informal traditions.

Unlike other policy changes that expanded opportunities for women, the rescinding of the combat exclusion policy was enacted during active, overseas, military counterinsurgency operations. These counterinsurgency operations were inherently gendered, and women were being recruited to be part of the “main effort,” not just to free a man to fight or operate in support functions (Hunter, 2019). By the mid-2000s, commanders on the ground recognized that they could not be either tactically or strategically successful if they ignored the role that women played (McBride & Wibben, 2012). The Army and Marine Corps’ Counterinsurgency Manuals (FMF 3–24 and MCWP 3–33.5 respectively) highlight the importance of access to “restricted populations,” including women, as a key to tactical and strategic success. Doctrinally, it is further recognized that women soldiers and Marines are necessary to access this part of the population and successfully implement counterinsurgency strategy. Indeed, in a battle for hearts and minds, women were needed to act as women. Women operators were expected to shed some of the masculine characteristics they had adopted and accentuate their “feminine side.”

In addition to necessitating gendered operations as a key to combat operations, counterinsurgencies are also unique in that they have a reciprocal impact on the identity of those who are fighting them. In other words, not only do soldiers shape the battlefield, but they are shaped by the cultures they experience. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the gendered nature of war and the warrior culture. Counterinsurgency operations in Iraq both resulted in the public persona of the male counterinsurgency fighter being softened and the image of the female fighter being made more prominent in the American psyche (Khalili, 2011). Counterinsurgency operations not only dispelled the myth that women cannot fight, but they also highlighted the reality that women are necessary for successful military operations.

It is against this backdrop that the repeal of the women in combat exclusion occurred. The combat-related activities of women in the modern battlespace of Iraq and the reality of counterinsurgency were key contributors to the Department of Defense’s decision to remove the women in combat exclusion (Kamarck, 2016). The Fiscal Year 2014 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was the first to address the removal of the ban. It directed the Services to create gender-neutral occupational standards for all newly

opened military occupational specialties. While the Services went about developing these standards in different ways, the end result was a set of physical standards required for any individual service member to begin training for a ground combat job.⁶

The adoption of gender-neutral occupational standards was done purportedly to ensure that women’s integration into previously closed positions did not undermine or disrupt the lethality of combat units (Kamarck, 2016). In doing so, the expansion of combat roles to women followed the historic trend of expecting women to conform to masculine stereotypes in order to participate in newly opened opportunities. However, the gender-neutral standards enacted did not reflect the reality of the very gendered ongoing combat operations.

Where historically there has been personal tension over identity in women’s military participation, the emphasis on gender-neutral standards in the midst of gendered-combat operations led to unintended confusion. This confusion manifested itself both in terms of what the policy was and how women socially fit within the military. Such a contradiction highlights the problems that come from creating a gender-neutral solution to a gendered problem.

METHODS

STUDY DESIGN AND SAMPLING

In order to discern the impact of these developments, I conducted focus groups while I was a member of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS). DACOWITS is charged with providing advice and recommendations to the Secretary of Defense on matters and policies relating to the recruitment, retention, employment, integration, well-being, and treatment of female service members in the Armed Forces. Since 2013, the implementation of the Services’ Gender Integration Implementation Plans has been a central focus of the committee. As Chair of the Employment and Integration subcommittee, I was charged with understanding the impact that the gender integration implementation plans had on the Services’ ability to achieve their mission.

Focus groups were conducted each spring between 2015–2019 on bases representing all five Services (i.e., Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard). Participants were divided by rank (i.e., junior enlisted, senior enlisted, and officer) and gender to create an environment that was conducive to free and honest discussion. Focus group protocols were grouped into three main categories: understanding of the policy, impact of the policy on decision to join/stay in the Service, and implementation of the policy in their particular unit. Each focus group was also given a mini survey to capture demographic information, including

years of service and plans for retirement/separation. All data collection instruments were ruled exempt by ICF's institutional review board with concurrence from the Department of Defense's Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to ensure protection of human subjects. A total of 2,834 individuals participated in focus groups. The gender breakdown was 44% identifying as women, 52% identifying as male, and 4% declining to identify. Rank breakdown was 32% officer and 68% enlisted. Women and officers were oversampled to ensure diversity in opinions.

ANALYSIS

Focus groups were transcribed by a contracted ICF research team. Analysis of transcribed focus groups was undertaken by a diverse team without existing conflicts of interest. The purpose of this analysis was to better understand the impact that the Services' gender integration plans had on women service members. Content review was done over a period of four weeks with weekly meetings for discussion of leading emergent themes and to ensure inter-rater reliability.

RESULTS

Focus groups revealed that a primary unintended consequence of the gender integration implementation policies was a sense of confusion, particularly among service women. This confusion is seen in three main aspects: confusion about the actual policy, confusion about communication on the policy, and confusion about how to perform based on policy guidelines. This confusion is a notable departure from the historic tension between being a woman and being in the military that women typically experience. That tension is straightforward and expected, while the current confusion leads to women not just questioning personal identity, but as to whether their service matters at all. As one Lioness Team member noted.

It made me feel more like a woman to do [be part of a Lioness Team]. I didn't have to hide any parts of my identity, and knew that my service matters. Now they expect me to act like a little man...Like nothing I did before ever counted.

This confusion exists for both those who had served in combat operations and those without deployment experience. Unlike in previous instances of policy reform that opened more opportunities for women, confusion over the actual policy existed in many instances. This was expressed through a misunderstanding of how standards are developed and why and how women are being brought into units. The emphasis on neutrality was a disconnect from the reality that both women and men

had experienced direct combat in Iraq (2003–Present) and Afghanistan (2001–Present).

CONFUSION OVER THE POLICY

“The Only Reason She's Here is Because the Standards Were Lowered”

Confusion about the actual nature of the policy related to women's integration was prevalent among most service members regardless of rank, gender, and/or branch of service. This confusion broadly took two forms. First, there was confusion about what was included in the policy, particularly regarding physical standards and to whom they applied. Next was confusion about how the policy was applied and what actions were included in the gender integration implementation plans. Taken together, this policy confusion resulted in women service members being viewed as “less than” by male members of previously closed occupational specialties and a belief that standards were being lowered to accommodate their presence to levels that would potentially undermine effectiveness and, in the worst of cases, cost lives.

Confusion about the policy was perceived through a lens of misunderstanding about how standards were set and what tasks were included in the set gender-neutral standards. When the announcement was made that the women in combat exclusion was being lifted, women had been actively engaged in combat operations for over a decade. Service members had been used to seeing women in a wide variety of positions, and the gendered dimensions of counterinsurgency doctrine were being frequently discussed in tactical planning. The importance of women's role in combat operations in Iraq was a topic of interest at senior level military education institutions. In the 2012 and 2013 academic years, 30% of the theses written at war college and command and staff institutions included some aspect of the impact of gender on counterinsurgency operations.⁷ Given the emphasis on women's roles in the Iraq war, there was an expectation that the implementation plans would be based on what women were currently doing. As a male officer noted, “I thought I would finally be able to formalize women in my unit in [Lioness and FET] roles. We all talked about it, but the [gender integration] plan made it harder to get those women in my unit.”

A primary aspect of policy confusion stemmed from a misunderstanding of the relationship between physical fitness standards and gender-neutral physical occupational standards. Physical fitness standards are gender and age normed. They are administrative tests designed to assess overall health and fitness, not gauge preparedness for a given occupation. In fact, Department of Defense (DoD) Instruction 1308 explicitly states that the physical fitness tests are not to be used for gauging occupational

readiness. However, this is not well understood. In every focus group, the majority of participants indicated that they did not receive information from their commands about the difference between occupational and administrative physical standards. Hence, most military personnel believe that physical fitness standards are designed to measure combat effectiveness; however, per the instruction, they are primarily an administrative tool.

The conflation of physical fitness standards with occupational standards allowed for the creation and perpetuation of the myth that standards were lowered for women to be included in newly opened jobs.

A big fear [in my occupational specialty] is that the standards will lower ... that the focus will be on integration rather than holding the standards. — Male Officer

When they were integrating, they were like “Standards are going to go low,” and I’ve heard men in our unit talk about [physical fitness] standards, and they are jealous, like, “The females have low standards and I want that.” —Junior Enlisted Woman

This focus on physical standards created confusion about the policy for individual women interested in transitioning into newly opened occupational specialties. While in Iraq, there had been an inherently gendered aspect to what they were doing. Yet the skills that they used in combat were not included in the gender integration implementation plans.⁸

The focus on physical skills resulted in women who were transitioning to these previously closed positions to receive dismissive comments from male counterparts. Lioness Team members recount what their male counterparts said to them after the gender integration implementation plans were released, and they began the transition into previously closed specialties:

I’m a 6’2”, 200-pound male, how can you a 5’3”, 130-pound female, ever expect to compete with me? —Enlisted Woman

If you can carry me up 20 flights of stairs like this man can, then I applaud you...but you can’t hold your own. —Enlisted Woman

Receiving these comments, women believed that their combat service no longer mattered. As one officer recounted, “when men see you do something, it validates you. But the things we did are not part of the standards. So it doesn’t matter anymore.” This feeling of defeat and non-belonging were similarly held by women who had not

had direct combat experience but had joined anticipating serving in previously closed occupational specialties. Many junior enlisted women recounted being discouraged due to a belief that there was no place for them in these specialties.

Originally, I signed an [combat arms occupational specialty] contract, and I was highly discouraged. [I was] discouraged by other males. [They said], “You don’t know how much work it’s going to be; are you sure you can handle that? It’s a lot of long hours. Not a place for you to be girly.” —Enlisted woman

CONFUSION FROM COMMUNICATION

“I Think I Just Saw It Online”

The confusion resulting from the focus on gender-neutrality while service members were actively engaged in a gendered war was heightened through a lack of consistent and formal communication from commands to service members about the integration plans. In focus groups, a majority of members cited a lack of communication in understanding the policy.

There was never an official thing put down through chain of command, but as more people heard, we talked about it with each other. —Junior Enlisted Man

I’ve seen more articles from Facebook about what’s going on in [my service] than from my own command. —Junior Enlisted Woman

I tried to [go to official sources] first but didn’t find anything. I took a week and really researched everything, and there wasn’t anything there. — Female Officer

There might have been some senior personnel [on] the officer side and command level that knew it was in the works and that it would get pushed down, but hearing about it from my civilian spouse...it loses a bit of its punch. Like when they were going to rescind “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” there was a lot of awareness and training...The issue for me is that they didn’t address female positions in combat arms in a similar fashion...There is no guidance. —Senior Enlisted Man

For service members that had recently participated in Lioness Teams or had been a part of infantry units with attached teams, the lack of formal communication highlighted the confusion about service and personal identity. Women who had served as Lioness Team members felt that their contributions were diminished as there was no mention in the gender integration plans about integrating lessons learned from counterinsurgency operations.

I thought that my command would have been excited given my experiences [as a Lioness Team member] ... when we got home and I read about women in combat I was all ready to transition. But then I heard nothing about how ... and read stories that they just wanted people who run fast. —Senior Enlisted Woman

PERFORMANCE CONFUSION

“I’ve Honestly Never Worked With Women—And I’m Not Sure I Like This”

In addition to confusion about the policy, women experienced social confusion about their place in the military. While in Iraq, though there was initial skepticism about the role of women, their on-the-job performance quickly proved that they were valuable members of the team—and essential for mission success. Both the fact that women had a niche role and the task-based cohesion forged over combat operations resulted in women being quickly accepted as part of the team. As one junior enlisted Lioness Team member recalls:

[We] actually had to do what we called “integration on the go” as the unit was being put in an operation. None of [the infantry] had ever worked with female [Service members]. The [senior enlisted leader] had the idea to have me do a question and answer with the platoon sergeants to allay some of their fears. What most of them didn’t realize is that women in the [Service] want to be in the [Service]. The mission comes first; we want to work hard. They need us for this mission. After 2 weeks, they were talking about how the women weren’t at all what they expected. Most of their experiences had been with spouses and dependents. They couldn’t picture what a female [Service member] could be. So once they saw us, and what they did they had a change [of opinion] and we were part of the team.

Task-based cohesion is shown to be a positive means of integrating diverse groups, particularly in the military (Spindel & Ralston, 2020). Women who had served in Iraq reported having positive experiences with unit cohesion due to the nature of the jobs they were expected to do. They were respected and felt part of the team because it was recognized that they had a particular role to play in the conflict.

However, when the gender integration implementation plans were put into place, an effort was made to diminish the differences between men and women. Though intended to promote fairness and ensure that women’s integration maintained military effectiveness levels, an unintended

consequence was that women did not experience the same levels of unit cohesion that they did while conducting gendered operations. This is exemplified by the experience of a man who had worked with Lioness teams in Iraq:

In Iraq the [females] had a job. It was a female job that we couldn’t do. But now they are expected to be like us, and I don’t think they’ll hack it. The infantry mindset is barbaric and aggressive. Can the females deal with it? ... they may be shunned or not accepted ... being around a group of guys in a combat situation, or out in the field, just the stuff that they talk about and how aggressive it is won’t be right with [them]. —Junior Enlisted Man

Women expressed similar frustrations, feeling torn between the type of job they had performed in Iraq and the consequences of gender-neutral standards. As one enlisted woman noticed, “I think there is an expectation that if I am expected to carry a pack like a man, I’m expected to act like him too.”

DISCUSSION

The stickiness of the connection between military service and masculine gender norms and the historical memory of opening positions to women in a gender-neutral way created confusion when the women in combat ban was eliminated against the backdrop of a gendered conflict. Though the context of the Iraq war was different than previous conflicts, the expectations of women’s integration was that they would integrate in ways similar to before. The unintended, yet negative consequences of this confusion, are seen both in how men reacted to women’s integration and women’s feelings about being evaluated on standards and skill sets that did not reflect the reality that they experienced in combat.

Men often reported feeling that women socially didn’t belong and that they couldn’t overcome social norms to accept women in these new roles. The focus on physicality heightened these feelings.

For the men there—for me, at least, there is the tendency to try to protect women. The guy on my right is getting shot but I’m thinking about the woman on my left. Let the guy fend for himself; don’t let a woman get hurt. That’s how I was raised, it’s ingrained in me. —Senior Enlisted Man

It’s a cultural thing ... it’s a man’s nature to protect a woman. Women can protect themselves, but when

you look at it the man is supposed to do this and women to do that. That is a realistic scenario he was taking about...Under heavy fire when I'm looking out for the women. She can protect and defend herself but I'm still looking out for her. —Senior Enlisted Man

These respondents had served with Lioness teams in Iraq. They noted that while in Iraq it was easier to understand women's roles because "they were doing a job I couldn't. We needed them, and trusted them to complete the mission." Removing the gendered aspect of the job made it harder for men to understand and often accept the importance of women's roles.

The impact on women was largely felt through feelings of isolation and a continued confusion about whether they should remain or even if they were the right person for the job. Women who had served successfully in Iraq recall coming home and being treated very differently than they were while deployed.

There's a lot of men who have been in the military a very long time. They're still in the mindset that women are the paper pushers. They can't be [in traditionally male career fields] and they can't do these jobs because they are women. They tell us now that since the requirements are gender-neutral, every slot a woman gets is a slot that could have gone to a man. —Senior Enlisted Woman

They have the idea that women don't belong [in that unit]. They have the mentality that you come in and make the [unit] less of a [unit]. Jobs like that it has to do a lot with the group ... The group now is like "This is a male career field and you don't belong here." —Junior Enlisted Woman

The consequences of women questioning their sense of belonging and continuing to feel unwelcomed is seen in the impact of recruitment and retention of women. At every pay grade, and consistent across time in service, women are more likely than their male counterparts to leave the service. The gap in attrition rates, however, began to narrow slightly in the 2009–2012 period, a time-period consistent with women being used in gendered roles in Iraq. This gap widened between 2014–2017, consistent with the period of introducing and emphasizing gender-neutral standards (Government Accountability Office, 2020). Similar trends are seen in women's propensity to serve. From 2008–2013, women's propensity to serve increased from 6% to over 10%. Between 2014–2017 it fell to below 7% (Office of People Analytics, 2018).

Women's feelings of confusion are having an impact on the ability to recruit and retain talent in the military. Though the decision to join and remain in the military is influenced by many factors, identity and sense of belonging are strong predictors of longevity of military service, particularly for women (Braun, 2015; Kirk, 2004). While serving in Iraq, women felt a sense of belonging and had a unique role in achieving the mission. However, the emphasis on gender-neutrality diminished this sense of belonging, resulting in a greater likelihood to leave the service.

The over-emphasis on physical standards, the lack of clear communication from their chain of command, and the resulting undermining of women's military service all contributed to the confusion that women felt. The failure of the gender integration plans to recognize the gendered nature of war have had a negative impact on the military's ability to recruit and retain women.

CONCLUSION

Iraq is not an outlier in being a gendered conflict. The gendered nature of both the planning and the conduct of operations is being recognized by both military and policy leaders. The passage of the 2017 Women, Peace and Security Act has codified the importance of women's military service. The Department of Defense's own implementation guidance directs the Services to recognize the unique diversity that women bring to successful military operations.

However, policies that seek to expand the role of women are still being enacted in a gender-neutral way. Beyond historic tensions associated with identity that have formally and informally existed, women are now experiencing a new confusion about their service. They have succeeded, often in very gendered ways, at doing their job, yet are told that to be successful in the future they need to de-gender their actions and adopt gender-neutral practices.

This research on the gender-neutral implementation of the removal of the women in combat ban during a very gendered conflict leads to three clear areas of policy recommendations, as well as opportunities for future research. As women are becoming an ever-growing part of the military, understanding their unique role and crafting policies that leverage what they bring to both tactical and strategic operations is more important than ever.

From a policy perspective, the Military Services must ensure a clear communications strategy up and down the chain of command about any implemented personnel policy changes. Clear and deliberate communication will work to prevent misinterpretation of policies that lead to confusion, as well as limit any rumors.

Next, physical fitness and occupational standards must be clearly differentiated.⁹ Several military occupational specialties have physical requirements that can literally be a matter of life and death. These requirements are above and beyond what is required for the general health and fitness of Service Members. The more clearly delineated the difference between physical fitness and occupational standards can be, the less confusion will linger.

Finally, a holistic approach to communicating the importance of women's perspectives and roles to military operations must be adopted. While gendered operations are increasingly recognized as essential for meeting tactical and strategic goals, warfighting is still primarily discussed as a masculine enterprise. This disconnect leads to feelings of otherness and non-belonging among women service members. Senior leaders must more clearly discuss not just that women are needed for integration, but why they are essential as well.

Adopting these three changes will help to mitigate the confusion that women experience and make for a more effective and engaged fighting force. The long-term consequences of this gender-neutral solution to a gendered problem is an area for much needed future research. Additionally, additional research is needed to better understand the impact of this confusion on women as they transition from the military into the veteran population. The women veteran population is unique, and there remains a dearth of research revealing the differences that this subset of the women veteran population faces. Continued work in this area will not only make the military more effective but will also aid in serving this population as it transitions into civilian life.

NOTES

- 1 While women played a large role in the war in Afghanistan, Iraq was the first test of women in conventional roles such as combat aviation. Iraq started as a much more conventional war, and was a more visible test of women in the roles that have been opened in the 1990s.
- 2 At the time of the 2003 Invasion, the Ground Combat Exclusion was still in place. This meant that women were excluded from being assigned to units that engage in ground combat below the brigade level. The Ground Combat Exclusion was removed as the US was transitioning from a combat to an advisory role and later intervention to combat ISIS. Since the removal of the ban, women have deployed as parts of ground combat units.
- 3 The FY14 National Defense Authorization Act mandated the creation of gender-neutral occupational standards for all previously closed occupational specialties. During the following year, representatives from the Services appeared before the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services three times to reassure the committee and the public that all standards will be gender neutral.
- 4 While there are accounts of women serving as snipers and spies during World War II, these stories are the exception, and, as Goldstein (2001) notes, are likely inflated.

- 5 Even in the "unconventional" wars such as Vietnam, the military focus remained on body counts as a measure of success.
- 6 For a detailed discuss of the methodology used by each of the Services and the reasoning behind the differences see Hardison et al., 2018
- 7 Estimates from the director of the military history department at the Army War College.
- 8 While the Services vary on the exact standards and skills, they all include a measured run time, ability to carry a 160–200 lb "dummy," and various strength tasks including pull-ups, pushups, and marches while carrying a heavy load.
- 9 In 2019, the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services issued a series of recommendations on clearly identifying and communicating the differences between physical fitness and occupational standards. As of the time of this writing, they have not yet been addressed by the Secretary of Defense or any of the Service Secretaries.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Kyleanne Hunter  orcid.org/0000-0002-8911-8739
United States Air Force Academy, US

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, E.** (2015, July 17). The real barrier for women marines. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/18/opinion/the-real-barrier-for-women-marines.html>
- Alvarez, L.** (2009, August 15). G.I. Jane breaks the combat barrier. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/us/16women.html>
- Aranda, J.** (2008, June 5). *Following the paw prints of the Lioness program*. 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. <https://www.3rdmaw.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/548497/following-the-paw-prints-of-the-lioness-program/>
- Archer, E. M.** (2013). The power of gendered stereotypes in the US Marine Corps. *Armed Forces & Society*, 39(2), 359–391. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X12446924>
- Armor, D. J., & Gilroy, C. L.** (2010). Changing minority representation in the US military. *Armed Forces & Society*, 36(2), 223–246. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X09339900>
- Beals, G.** (2010). Women Marines in counterinsurgency operations: Lioness and Female Engagement Teams. *USMC Command and Staff College*. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA604399>
- Braun, L. A.** (2015). Research on US military women: Recruitment and retention challenges and strategies. *Military Medicine*, 180(12), 1247–1255. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-14-00601>
- Brown, M. T.** (2012). A woman in the army is still a woman: Representations of women in US Military recruiting advertisements for the All-Volunteer Force. *Journal of Women,*

- Politics & Policy*, 33(2), 151–175. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2012.667737>
- Carreiras, H.** (2009). Gender integration policies in the armed forces: A double-edged sword? In G. Caforio (Ed.), *Advances in military sociology: Essays in honor of Charles C. Moskos* (pp. 183–194). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1108/S1572-8323\(2009\)000012B013](https://doi.org/10.1108/S1572-8323(2009)000012B013)
- Doan, A. E., & Portillo, S.** (2017). Not a woman, but a soldier: Exploring identity through translocational positionality. *Sex Roles*, 76(3–4), 236–249. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0661-7>
- Dyvik, S. L.** (2017). Gender and counterinsurgency. In R. Woodward & C. Duncanson (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook of gender and the military* (pp. 319–334). Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51677-0_20
- Eulriet, I.** (2012). *Women and the military in Europe: Comparing public cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230369863>
- Friedl, K. E.** (2012). Body composition and military performance—many things to many people. *The Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, S89–S100. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0b013e31825ced6c>
- Goldin, C. D.** (1991). The role of World War II in the rise of women's employment. *The American Economic Review*, 741–756. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2006640>
- Goldstein, J. S.** (2001). *War and gender*. Cambridge University Press.
- Government Accountability Office.** (2020). *Female active-duty personnel: Guidance and Plans needed for recruitment and retention efforts*. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-61>
- Hardison, C. M., Hosek, S. D., & Saavedra, A. R.** (2018). *Establishing gender-neutral physical standards for ground combat occupations: Volume 2. A Review of the Military Services' Methods*. RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1340z2.html. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1340.2>
- Herbert, M. S.** (1998). *Camouflage isn't only for Combat: Gender, sexuality and women in the military*. New York University Press.
- Hunter, K.** (2015, September 21). We need what women bring to the fight. *War on the Rocks*. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/09/we-need-what-women-bring-to-the-fight/>
- Hunter, K.** (2019). *Shoulder to Shoulder, yet worlds apart: Variations in women's integration into the militaries of Norway, France and the United States*. <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/1665/>
- Hunter, K., & Best, R.** (2020). You Can't have women in peace without women in conflict and security. *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 8(2), 5–22. <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/17-Nov-82-Final-Draft.pdf>
- Kamarck, K. N.** (2016). *Women in combat: Issues for Congress*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42075.pdf>
- Khalili, L.** (2011). Gendered practices of counterinsurgency. *Review of International Studies*, 37(4), 1471–1491. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23025562>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021051000121X>
- Kirk, N. R.** (2004). Air Force Core identity and its impact on retention. *Air Command and Staff College*. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA407037>
- Latty, M. A.** (2009, June 12). *Lioness work to improve community in local Iraq city*. 2nd Marine Logistics Group: <https://www.2ndmlg.marines.mil/Hidden/News/News-Article-Display/Article/516782/lionesses-work-to-improve-community-in-local-iraq-city/>
- Lemmon, G. T.** (2015, December 4). Women in combat? They've already been serving on the front lines, with heroism. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-1204-lemmon-women-combat-20151204-story.html>
- MacKenzie, M.** (2015). *Beyond the band of brothers: the US military and the myth that women can't fight*. Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107279155>
- McBride, K., & Wibben, A.** (2012). The gendering of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 3, 199–215. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/477665>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2012.0012>
- Meyer, L. D.** (1994). *Creating GI Jane: The Women's Army Corps during WWII*. University of Wisconsin.
- Mitchell, B.** (1997). *Women in the military: Flirting with disaster*. Regnery Publishing.
- Office of People Analytics.** (2018). *Update on the female recruiting market*. Department of Defense. <https://dacowits.defense.gov/Portals/48/Documents/General%20Documents/RFI%20Docs/Sept2018/OPA%20RFI%201.pdf?ver=2018-09-06-225121-940>
- Schogol, J.** (2019, January 15). Veterans: women are already in combat, so stop saying they shouldn't be in combat units. *Task and Purpose*. <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/veterans-women-combat-units/>
- Segal, M. W.** (1995). Women's military roles cross-nationally past, present, and future. *Gender & Society*, 9(6), 757–775. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124395009006008>
- Sjoberg, L., & Gentry, C.** (2007). *Mothers, monsters, whores: Women's violence in global politics*. Zed Books.
- Spindel, J., & Ralston, R.** (2020). Taking social cohesion to task: Perceptions of transgender military inclusion and concepts of cohesion. *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 5(1), 80–96. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz045>
- Wenger, J. W., O'Connell, C., & Cottrell, L.** (2018). *Examination of Recent Deployment Experience Across the Services and Components*. RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1928.html. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1928>
- Yellin, E.** (2010). *Our mothers' war: American women at home and at the front during World War II*. Simon and Schuster.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Hunter, K. (2021). "In Iraq, We Were Never Neutral": Exploring the Effectiveness of "Gender-Neutral" Standards in a Gendered War. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(2), pp. 6–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i2.265>

Submitted: 20 May 2021 Accepted: 20 May 2021 Published: 27 July 2021

COPYRIGHT:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Journal of Veterans Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by VT Publishing.