



Should Women Be Allowed in Combat?

[This article addresses both sides of the question, "Should women be allowed in combat?"]

Women are still officially barred from combat in the U.S. military, but in Afghanistan and Iraq, they're fighting--and dying--alongside the men

YES

American women are engaging in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, and as a result, some are returning home with wounds both obvious and hidden. The issue is not whether women should be allowed in combat; it's that our attitudes and laws need to catch up to the reality on the battlefield.

In the U.S. Army (as in the other military services), women are barred from holding a combat-arms position, including the infantry. In addition, female soldiers are prohibited from serving in ground-combat units.

Despite that prohibition, I was attached to an infantry battalion for my 12-month tour in Iraq. There were not enough male soldiers in my Civil Affairs detachment for all the infantry battalions we had to support. Out of sheer necessity, the official policy was ignored. I went everywhere the infantry soldiers did, lived as they did, and faced the same dangers they did.

Many female soldiers have been in, or still are in, the same situation: They go out on missions and face the possibility of roadside bombs, small-arms fire, and more. In today's military conflicts, there are no front lines, and the dangers are everywhere.

Should women be allowed to hold a combat-arms role, and not just provide support? Yes, absolutely. Some argue that women are not physically or emotionally capable of being infantry or field artillery soldiers, but women in a dozen countries, including Israel and Canada, are already proving themselves in such roles.

The bottom line is that in the U.S., women are still perceived as less capable than men, and the law of our land enforces that outdated attitude.

Catherine Ross

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NO

The nation's pride in our military women does not justify assignments in direct ground combat, which involves more than the experience of being in danger, or even the risk of ambush.

Forget about video-game action heroes like Lara Croft, and think about real-life infantry, Marines, and Special Operations Forces that engage the enemy in the most remote and dangerous parts of Afghanistan. These men carry electronic equipment, weapons, ammunition, heavy body armor, and water weighing 50 to 100 pounds. Such burdens would weigh more heavily on smaller female soldiers who have, on average, 45 to 50 percent less upper-body strength and 25 to 30 percent less aerobic capacity, which is essential for endurance.

In the Army's own surveys, 90 percent of enlisted women have said they oppose involuntary combat assignments on the same basis as men. They know that training for female soldiers is modified to compensate for physical differences between men and women, but there can be no modifications on the battlefield. In direct combat, women would not have an equal opportunity to survive, or to help fellow soldiers survive.

Even if physical capabilities were objectively measured and equal, co-ed combat assignments would affect discipline and unit cohesion. Women lose more duty time due to medical issues, including pregnancy, and their absence would be particularly disruptive in combat units, where concentration and mutual trust are essential for survival.

At times, we have no choice about sending young men to war, but we do have a choice when it comes to sending young women. Changing that would be a mistake.

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President, Center for Military Readiness

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