For centuries, women have been integral to militaristic endeavors, and yet have remained marginalized as inferiors or liabilities. In addition, although female participation has steadily increased in the U.S. military\(^1\), research has found that they continue to experience sexual harassment (Enloe, 2000; Kimberling et al., 2010; Mattocks et al., 2012), gendered violence (Kimberling et al., 2010; Mattocks et al., 2012), gender stereotyping (Howard & Prividera, 2004; 2008a), ridicule (Enloe, 2000), and a host of other injustices by virtue of a patriarchal militaristic culture. These experiences are poignantly addressed in Kirby Dick's documentary *The Invisible War*. The ideological posturing that reinforces the marginal status of women not only sanctions their abuses but has supported a gendered two-class system forwarded by governmental actors. In spite of passage of the Women's Armed Service Integration Act in 1948, which granted women official membership into the U.S. military, they remain excluded from combat roles. However, the beginnings of a change were articulated in 2013.

In January of 2013, the Women in the Service Implementation Plan rescinded the "direct combat exclusion rule" for female soldiers. The exclusionary policy was originally articulated in the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule, which itself had reaffirmed the gendered two-class system. With the repeal of the rule, a victory was had for women wishing to serve in direct combat. However, the repeal of the rule has not enjoyed an instantaneous implementation. Nor is it definitive in its own right. The timeline to allow women full access to the military is influenced by the implementation of the policy to integrate women and men and by the opportunity for service units to argue for continued restrictions based on specific needs or demands. Thus, true to many significant policies, the definitive victory reported in the media is, in reality, a qualified one and it is entirely possible it could be a significantly emptied one by the policy deadline to “eliminate unnecessary gender-biased barriers to service” (Dempsey, 2013, p. 2) in the first quarter of 2016.

Although women have had long-standing participation on and off the field of military action, it has been an ongoing battle in the United States to validate that participation in a nation advocating “liberty, and justice for all.” Those in many nations find the
two-class system puzzling as women actively serve in combat contexts in their own countries, including Israel, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Sweden, and Canada. The history of these countries is marked with varying degrees of access and conflict over changes in access. Furthermore, these countries have limitations on women's access such as restrictions from submarine duty. Even so, it is telling that women's inclusion to a greater range of combat related functions in the United States has experienced such resistance in a nation whose professed ideology is one of freedom and equality.

As it stands, existing policy and media conversations regarding women's military participation continue to devalue that participation and compromise the equitable changes that could be advanced by the full repeal of combat exclusionary policies. These ideologically reinforced positions include: the physical body, differential training standards, parenting, sex “nature,” and soldiering risks. Such positions then inform and define public opinion as opposed to integration.

**Sex and Soldiering: Ideological Myth vs. Empirical Fact**

It has been long reported that men are physically larger and stronger than women. On average, this is certainly true. Mean and median height, weight, endurance, and weight bearing across the board tend to demonstrate that men have physical advantages over women. As sold to soldiers and civilians alike, soldiering is a physical activity. Consequently, size and strength matter. The obvious flaw in this thinking is that “averages” are just that—they do not say anything about “maximums,” “minimums,” or distributions of strength or size. Nor do such general measures identify why size or strength are important standards by which to measure soldiering activity. Even so, they are ideologically convenient and consistent with derivational thinking. They are easily ranked: “strong” is superior to “weak,” “tall” is superior to “short,” and, of course in the final analysis, “man” is superior to “woman.”

Upon further examination, the myth unravels. One of the strongest cases for women's participation in military aviation has been size. Ever since the development of fly-by-wire (electronic) systems, physical strength has been a decreasing factor for successful piloting and is today a virtual non-issue. Agility, deft of touch, and trainability in maneuvers have reigned supreme for successful combat pilots. Furthermore, larger size is an impediment in this context (indeed in many equipment contexts including tanks, armored personnel carriers, and other vehicles). Space is scarce on the flight deck—pilots are surrounded by technology. Being compact allows for movement and being light aids in top speed and reduced fuel consumption. Such size-gender issues have been fought in horse-racing and even ski jumping (where for the first time this year the Olympics held a women's ski jumping competition). Even in these sports where small is superior, there has been an ideological resistance to female participation. Of course, not all military activity requires presence in a compact space—much requires extended walking, physical strength, and the stamina to engage in close combat. To this end, it
is important to measure not the average but the standard by which one may effectively participate. This brings us to a myth-turned-policy based on strength.

The issue of equal participation in the military is further clouded by “progressive” policies that set lower physical standards for women’s participation in the armed forces. Such differential standards make more women eligible to participate (of course lowered standards for men would have the same effect) but the lower standard for women aggravates the existing conception that women are less physically suited for combat and military participation. Indeed, the standards indicate that women are generally inferior to men. So what is the solution? Similar standards could be set. If the standards are meaningful (and there is even argument that the existing standards are more or less arbitrary), then simply expecting all participants to meet those standards would remove much of the stigma of “weakness.” Many soldiers are resistant to women’s participation because women (under current standards) will likely be less able to help because of being less strong (e.g., moving wounded, working on heavy equipment). They would then be a liability compared to a stronger individual. An equal standard would not predict or ensure that the strongest member of a unit is male or female, but it would ensure that all members of that unit were able to execute their jobs competently.

An ongoing manifestation of ideological bias is the stateside issue of parenting and, in particular, single parenting. The double standard is quite visible in coverage of soldiers in the existing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Men are recognized as great fathers for their service. Women are questioned as mothers because of their service. It is a simple extension of the classic argument that “the woman’s place is in the home.” Dads fulfill their identities by working for their families. Moms compromise their identities by working in spite of their families. Public perceptions of this are aggravated when discussing casualties. In the words of a past study participant, “nobody wants to see mom in a coffin, NOBODY” (Prividera & Howard, 2012). Yet does anyone really want to see dad in a coffin? Perhaps the question should be “should parents serve in combat?” or perhaps “should parents serve in the military?” Yet neither of these questions gain traction in the slippery surface constructed by the ideology. The reality is that parents are valuable to families. Furthermore, the equal value of them as part of the family unit is actually underscored by the dominant heterosexual ideology that says each sex is necessary for completion of the family unit. Not only is the myth a myth, it is self-sabotaging when scrutinized. Conversations regarding mothers and fathers are ideologically biased at best and socially repressive in practice.

The ideologically constructed nature of the sexes themselves serves as another form of resistance to the repeal of combat exclusions. The male (public participant) by definition is better suited and more desirable than the female (private participant) who is slated to govern the home while the male governs the world. This distinction has progressively deteriorated over time and has accelerated in the United States during the past century. However, it still has wide acceptance in the forms of “preference” for extra-home participation, particularly in the military. Men are framed as aggressors,
In The Salon

composed, logical, physically imposing, and generally well suited to combat. Women
are framed as nurturing, emotional, unstable, to be imposed upon, and ill-suited to
combat (Prividera & Howard, 2012).

This gives way to an ideologically compelling argument for the exclusion of women
from combat: protective instinct. The concern is that men will respond to female
casualties more emotionally than to male casualties. By virtue of this they may make
rash decisions because of the presence of female soldiers. The profound implication
of this dimension of the myth (and one beautifully exposed in the closing scenes of the
popular film G.I. Jane) is that it justifies women’s exclusion for something others are
doing and something beyond their own control. Self-control, a hallmark of masculine
composure, apparently is trumped by female presence and any loss of that control
during a female presence is not the male’s responsibility.

An even more ideologically compelling argument manifests in the inherent risks of
soldiering. Soldiers may not be wounded or killed (albeit producing unsettling media
images and family hardships) but may, worse yet, become prisoners of war whereby
they may experience rape, abuse, or other forms of sexual assault. That this is a concern
only for women is disturbing on multiple levels. Men already experience sexual
assault. The exclusive concern for women serves a two-fold ideological purpose. First,
it creates resistance to allowing full participation of women. And second, it frames
men as impervious to sexual degradation. The consequences are that: (a) women
are ideologically justified for exclusion, and (b) males who experience sexual assault
endure further victimization via ridicule, neglect, and stigmatization.

This elaborate construction as male/aggressor—female/recipient of aggression and
a lack of male accountability for actions in the presence of females has played out
extensively in military contexts whereby abuses are imposed upon women and military
institutions are reluctant to hold men accountable for them. The experiences of female
soldiers at the hands of their peers are to be overlooked, ignored, or downplayed.
Thus, the sexual offenses experienced by women soldiers highlighted in The Invisible
War, numerous news exposés, and the Department of Defense’s self-reports on sexual
violence continue to be masked to protect the institution. It is quite instructive that
the domestic violence is to be tolerated but women are to be excluded to prevent them
from suffering the same violence from “the enemy.” All of these factors contribute to an
ideological framing of public opinion itself.

Public Opinion

These concerns all culminate in the context of manufactured consent within media
discourse and in the context of public opinion. Perhaps the most eye-opening fact
regarding the participation of women in combat activity may be found in opinion polls
of the United States’ public. It is often said that the public is not ready to see women die
on the fields of battle. Yet, we already have. The rhetoric persists that images of female
casualties will be unpalatable to the public. In other nations, this has already happened and they continue to support female involvement in their combat endeavors.

Furthermore, this characterization of U.S. public opinion is not entirely accurate. There may be concerns and it may be unpleasant (as seeing male casualties of war is also unpleasant) but when it comes to actual opinion regarding combat participation the numbers have overwhelmingly been in favor for integration of the combat ranks since 1991 based on repeated Gallop polls (see Brown, 2013). In fact, only one Gallup poll in February of 1991 (during open combat in the first Gulf War) showed a majority of those polled against (56%) women in combat. Even so, 38% (nearly 4 people in 10) still supported integration. Open combat may have influenced the numbers but during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn there were multiple polls conducted by Gallup all of which supported integration: December 2001 (56%), May 2005 (66%), and September 2007 (74%). To be sure, the ideology still has a foothold. In a Gallup poll in December of 2003 (after President Bush declared the “end of open hostilities” but still in a context of active fighting), the responses clearly indicated that there was support for integration “by choice” rather than by mandate: 37% said combat assignments should be done on the same terms as men and 45% said women should be able to choose combat assignments. Still, only 16% said integration should not occur at all.

Perhaps it is truly a sign of the times that the combat exclusion rule has been repealed. Political and social opinion is changing. Yet, even though public opinion has increasingly favored integration the framings of women soldiers persist. This creates an even tighter double-bind whereby female soldiers are told that it is okay to participate but then are also told their parental status, personal health, and the lives of the men around them may be put at risk by that participation (Prividera & Howard, 2012). This resistance is manifest in the repeal of the policy by allowing the military bodies to choose where women can and cannot participate.

Like so many corporate and government policy decisions, the end result is simply a procedural or legal change. It does not change the ideology and, in fact, may end up being a hollowed out shell of an opportunity in which the ideology can continue to hide (much like the differential physical standards in current military use). By mid-2016, we may be in a better position to know if this policy will stand before the ideology as a threat to it or if it will simply be a shield for it. For many, the result will be remembered as yet another battle in the invisible war against female soldiers.

Ultimately, the rescinding of the exclusionary rule is another stage in the process of establishing women’s validity as soldiers and social members. To varying degrees, this stage can be seen as progress (e.g., inclusionary, equitable) or as regress (e.g., further militarization of society, normalization of war). In either case, the dialogue surrounding the policy change continues to reinforce ideological definitions of “masculine” and “feminine” and what it means to soldier as a United States citizen.
Women's presence in the U.S. military has steadily increased over the past three decades, from 3% in 1972 to 14.6% active duty personnel in 2011. Today, women comprise 13.6% of the Army, 6.8% of Marines, 16.4% of the Navy, and 19.1% of the Air Force (U.S. Department of Defense, 2011).

References


