On 24 January US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey announced that ‘we are eliminating the direct ground combat exclusion rule for women and we are moving forward with a plan to eliminate all unnecessary gender-based barriers to service’. This triggered media speculation that all barriers to women serving in the US military would quickly be lifted. But much of the reporting on the policy shift was over-simplistic. Panetta and Dempsey’s announcement is more conditional and nuanced than is often described. And it allows the Pentagon to decide to continue to exclude women from some combat roles. There is a real possibility that this may happen – especially for US Army and Marine Corps infantry.

For most of history, armed forces have tended to exclude women, other than in medical roles. But since the middle of the twentieth century many Western armed forces have increasingly allowed women to serve in a wider range of combat service support roles, including logistics, maintenance, military police and personnel administration. In the last 25 years this trend has continued globally and widened to include engineers, artillery, military intelligence, aviation and signals. Most armies continue to exclude women from roles, principally in infantry and armoured units, that require direct close combat with the enemy. Some countries, such as the United States and Britain, now have no restrictions on women serving in their navies or air forces.
In 1967 the United States abolished its quota limiting women to 2% of enlisted personnel and 10% of officers. Legal restrictions on the roles of women in the armed forces were removed in the 1990s, but the policy continued to close certain roles to women. In 1994 the Pentagon lifted its ‘risk rule’ that excluded women from units that had a high probability of engaging in ground combat. It was replaced by the Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule:

Women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground ... Direct ground combat is engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force’s personnel. Direct ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, or shock effect.²

The rule excluded women from infantry, armour, artillery, combat engineers, air-defence artillery, special forces and any support units that co-located with these units. The policy appears to have been based on an assumption that future battlefields would be linear, with a distinction between forward areas and rear areas.

But the prolonged counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan saw no clear distinction between front line and rear echelons, with personnel serving in bases or travelling in logistic convoys subject to a 360-degree threat from mortar and rocket attack, ambushes and roadside bombs. And women were increasingly employed with combat units, for example to conduct searches of women and as specialist ‘female engagement teams’. Between 9/11 and January 2013, 152 US servicewomen were killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan. By then women made up almost 15% of US military personnel.

The Pentagon in February 2012 concluded that

the dynamics of the modern-day battlefield are non-linear, meaning there are no clearly defined front line and safer rear area where combat support
operations are performed within a low-risk environment. Therefore, there is no compelling reason for continuing the portion of the policy that precludes female Service members from being assigned to units or positions that are doctrinally required to physically co-locate and remain with direct ground combat units.3

The Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule would be revised so that the army would ‘open positions at the battalion level of direct ground combat units’. This opened roles in rocket artillery, locating radar and maintenance of fighting vehicles. But direct combat roles in infantry armour and special forces would remain closed to women.4

But there was increasing pressure for these barriers to be lifted further. The US public had grown accustomed to hearing of female casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was argued that earlier policies insisting that African Americans serve in separate units and excluding gay people from the US military had been changed with no negative effect on military readiness. Eliminating restrictions on the role of women would widen the pool of talent that the US forces could draw on. Advocates of change argued that since a majority of senior leadership positions in the US military were held by former infantry and armour officers, excluding women from these roles created an unnecessary glass ceiling for female officers. Opening all roles to women would help reduce latent sexism and sexual harassment within the US forces. And several female officers filed lawsuits against the Pentagon and US Army, arguing that exclusion of females from ground combat roles violated their constitutional rights. The issue was heatedly debated in Congress.5

After Panetta and Dempsey’s announcement, US forces have until May 2013 to review units and positions currently closed to women and develop ‘validated, gender-neutral occupational standards’. But they may recommend that particular occupational specialities or units closed to women remain closed. These exceptions ‘must be narrowly tailored and based on a rigorous analysis of factual data regarding the knowledge, skills and abilities needed for the position’.6 Exceptions will also require the personal approval of the secretary of defence.
Dempsey said that the exercise would maintain readiness, morale and unit cohesion and preserve war-fighting capability. This would require ‘setting clear standards of performance for all occupations based on what it actually takes to do the job’ and ‘development of “gender-neutral standards”’. The previous rules had allowed automatic blanket exclusions of women from many combat units. Now it would be up to the services to prove any case for excluding women.

He also observed that it was important not to learn the wrong lessons from the previous decade:

The kind of warfare we’re involved in now is based on forward operating bases. So you foray out of a base – you’re generally back there very frequently. Sometimes every day you come back to the base, where you have the mess hall, you have – you have housing units and shower units and so forth … if you think about the difference between counterinsurgency and a potential conflict on the Korean peninsula, a very different environment that requires a different level of physical stamina.7

He believed that, although some women would meet the very high physical standards required to serve in combat units, including special forces, the new principles may lead to an assessment that some specialities and ratings should remain exceptions. It was essential that ‘as we introduce to women to previously closed occupations, we must make sure that there are a sufficient number of females entering the career field and already assigned to the related commands and leadership positions in order to sustain success over time.’

Dempsey also observed that allowing women to enter the US Army Military Academy at West Point had made it a better place. The US Army had a problem of sexual harassment of women and removing remaining restrictions would help reduce this: ‘when you have one part of the population that is designated as warriors and another part that’s designated as something else, I think that disparity begins to establish a psychology that in some cases led to that environment. I have to believe, the more we can treat people equally, the more likely they are to treat each other equally.’8
Other countries’ armies
A significant minority of Western armies have removed all restrictions on the role of women, allowing them to join all types of combat units. But in every such case, very few women have in fact served in close combat roles. All Israelis, men and women, are required to do military service and upon enlistment in the Israeli Defense Forces women are offered the opportunity to serve in combat roles (although some positions remain closed). Yet they make up only 3% of combat soldiers. Women make up 19% of the French army, for example, but only 1.7% of the infantry; for Canada the figures are 17% and 3.8%. Women comprise 12.5% of the New Zealand Army but only 2% and 1% of their infantry and armoured corps respectively. Norway’s army is 6.6% women but the proportion of women in the infantry is well below 1%.

A major factor behind the small numbers of women serving in combat roles is the rigorous physical fitness requirement for such roles. All armies set more demanding standards of fitness and endurance for infantry and other close combat roles than for logistic, medical and supporting branches. Other reasons cited by the militaries concerned include a perceived lack of emotional resilience or aggressiveness and negative gender stereotyping by male soldiers. The evidence suggests that very few women are attracted to the ground close combat role and those that are leave earlier than their male counterparts.

The Canadian experience is illuminating. In 1989 a court ruling required all barriers to employing women in combat roles be removed. The proportion of women in such roles rose from 0.3% in 1989 to 3.8% in 2001, where it has roughly remained. But whilst the attrition rate of men in Canadian combat units was about 8%, for women it was 19%. The main reason appeared to be that women tended to prioritise family life over the military.9

UK sex discrimination and equality law allows women to be excluded from military posts where the military judgement is that the employment of women would undermine and degrade combat effectiveness. The British armed forces allow women to serve in all roles, including combat air and submarines, apart from ‘ground combat units where the primary role
is to close with and kill the enemy’. For the British Army this applies to armour and infantry. The same policy excludes women from the amphibious infantry of the Royal Marines. Women are excluded from the elite Special Air Service and Special Boat Service special forces regiments. But they are allowed, indeed encouraged, to serve in the Special Reconnaissance Regiment; its capability to conduct covert surveillance in civilian clothes has benefitted greatly from female personnel.

These restrictions have twice been reviewed by the UK chiefs of staff. In 2001–02 an extensive analysis, including field trials and medical evidence, suggested that out of the country’s population of women of recruitable age, only 0.5% had sufficient levels of fitness to meet the requirements of the infantry. And there was evidence from sports medicine and other fields, that women are more easily injured than men, take longer to recover from injury than men of similar age, and see this recovery rate slow with age more rapidly than it does with men. The analysis concluded that this evidence, or similar broad psychological differences, did not justify a blanket ban, since

‘We both turned and started firing at same moment – it didn’t matter she was a medical sergeant, just that she was getting rounds out. The kit was not an issue – she carried her own and was happy to carry her own weight.’

**Male British soldier**

‘There was no difference in the professional manner in which she conducted herself compared with a similar rank – she performed better than the second in command. She was a highly professional and effective team member, she showed genuine courage, and gave an exemplary performance.’

**Male British officer**

‘We were taught at Sandhurst “you need to work double hard as a girl and you have to cut it with the best of them”. As a female officer entering a male dominated environment, you have to prove yourself, being true to your word and physically capable.’

**Female British officer**

‘I feel my presence was different to some other females; I mixed in well, was a bit of a tomboy and had the same banter. I know that there are many women out there who flirted and that would make a big difference to the way the men treated them.’

**Female British soldier**

some women would certainly be able to meet the standard required. The key issue was ‘the potential impact of gender mixing in the small teams essential to success in the close combat environment’. And this could only be tested in practice. ‘To admit women would, therefore, involve a risk with no gains in terms of combat effectiveness to offset it. Taking the risk that the inclusion of women in close combat teams could adversely affect those units in the extraordinary circumstances of high intensity close combat cannot be justified.’

But British as well as American servicewomen suffered casualties in supporting roles in Iraq and Afghanistan. British women won medals for gallantry, including an RAF helicopter pilot who recovered a casualty under fire from a besieged British base and a female medic who fought insurgents attacking her and the casualties she was treating. So in 2010 the MoD revisited its previous study and also analysed the role played by women in the more recent campaigns. This involved interviews with many male and female soldiers who had been in mixed-sex teams during ground combat incidents in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of the women had been medics, dog handlers, searchers, engineers or in fire-support teams. The majority of those interviewed, both men and women, felt that the presence of servicewomen had not been a distraction and had not affected the judgement of tactical commanders. But the majority of male soldiers interviewed were uncomfortable with the concept of women serving in armour or infantry. And a very small minority of men considered that all-male teams were more cohesive than mixed-gender teams. Most women saw no need to change the existing rules and very few expressed any desire to serve in a direct ground combat role.

The MoD concluded that their study ‘provided evidence of the effectiveness of women in ground close-combat situations’, but did not address the question with regard to engaging in such activities on a daily basis rather than in one-off events, and thus did not ‘provide the basis for a clear recommendation either way as to whether the current policy of excluding women from ground close-combat roles should be retained or rescinded’. Ministers were ‘satisfied that the continued exclusion of women from ground close-combat roles was a proportionate means of maintaining the combat effectiveness of the Armed Forces and was not based on a stereotypical view
of women’s abilities but on the potential risks associated with maintaining cohesion in small mixed-gender tactical teams engaged in highly-dangerous close-combat operations’.

**Hard choices**

Implicit in the UK argument and some of Dempsey’s remarks is the proposition that ground close combat in war is uniquely difficult and demanding, more demanding than logistic and combat support conducted from fixed bases and combat outposts in counter-insurgency. Behind this is a further implicit judgement that the greatest demands in war are on low-level leadership and on cohesion of small tactical teams. Both Dempsey and the UK defence chiefs accept that a small proportion of women may meet the demanding physical standards. Both also fear, but do not explicitly say, that the introduction of women into small all-male teams carries with it the risk of introducing sexual tension into these teams. They feel that some women may exploit their attractiveness to male colleagues and superiors. They also worry that the behaviour of male soldiers and commanders will change, for example introducing an element of additional protectiveness to women soldiers.

Another factor is that in both armies a high proportion of infantry soldiers are recruited from the least well-educated parts of society, as are the corporals and sergeants who form the lowest tier of leadership at squad and platoon level. Junior leadership in combat is the most demanding of all leadership roles. The UK chiefs of staff deliberately chose not to add to the challenges facing these leaders, a proportion of whom will be less effective than the average. Their bottom line is that introducing women into infantry squads and platoons and into tank crews runs the risk of making leadership of these teams even more difficult, in an environment that is most unforgiving of mistakes.

There are counter-arguments. Although British policy excludes women from infantry and armour, it places no restrictions on women in artillery or engineers. So an infantry company conducting a dismounted attack could be accompanied by a female artillery officer. She and her team would be as much in the thick of fighting as any of the infantry, even if her primary
weapon was the artillery fire she directed. The same argument applies to combat engineers who could be right up with the leading infantry, clearing mines and blowing holes in walls. Indeed the crew of an engineer tank breaching a minefield are as much in the centre of fighting as those of any other armoured vehicle, as are artillery fire controllers in their armoured vehicles. And in Afghanistan UK Apache attack helicopters, some with female aircrew, have often functioned as flying tanks engaging in direct fire battles with insurgents. So the British way of grouping combat support at the low tactical level blurs the edges of their otherwise clear-cut policy. It particularly appears to undermine the British policy of excluding women from armoured units.

Another counter-argument is that there are no reports from the UK, US or other forces that allowing gays to serve has introduced sexual tension into combat units or reduced military effectiveness, so there is no reason to think that allowing women would do so either.

* * *

In Britain, unlike in the United States, there is no current groundswell of public and political opinion in favour of allowing women into infantry or armoured units. And women who want the adventure and challenge of testing themselves against the enemy have no shortage of opportunities, including in bomb disposal, unmanned aerial vehicles, human intelligence teams and special reconnaissance. The relatively small size of the British forces means that only a very small number of women would meet the fitness requirements of the infantry.

The much greater size of the US forces and US population means that if women are allowed into the US Army and Marine Corps infantry, some determined and extremely fit women will very probably succeed in completing infantry training. But evidence from both the military and civilian professions suggests that when a few women enter a previously all-male field, successful adaptation to the new environment is more difficult if there are no women already in place in the organisation. This ‘lone woman effect’ is probably why Dempsey said that
in order to account for their safety and their success in those kinds of units, we got to have enough of them so that they have mentors and leaders above them – you know, you wouldn’t want to take one woman who can meet a standard and put her in a particular unit. The issue there wouldn’t be privacy. It would be, where’s her ability to have upward mobility and compete for command if she’s one of one? So we have to work both the standards and the critical mass, to make this work.\textsuperscript{13}

Dempsey, the chiefs of staff of the US Army and the commandant of the US Marine Corps have hard decisions to make. They are likely to conclude that, whilst a few women may qualify to serve in infantry units, it is highly likely that they will be a very small minority. If so, will they achieve the critical mass of numbers that make them a self-sustaining cohort? Evidence from other armies suggests this is highly unlikely. But if they decide that enough women would join the infantry to achieve critical mass, they will then have to assess the largely unquantifiable risk that allowing women into ground combat units will make low-level leadership in direct combat more difficult, with resulting reduction of military effectiveness. And would this divert highly capable women from other roles in the US land forces where they are more likely to succeed? There are no easy answers to these questions.

Notes

\textsuperscript{4} Burelli, \textit{Women in Combat}.
\textsuperscript{5} The arguments are well described in Megan H. MacKenzie, ‘Let Women Fight’, \textit{Foreign Affairs}, vol. 91, no. 6, November–December 2012.
Women in Ground Combat


8 Ibid.


13 ‘Press Briefing by Secretary Panetta and General Dempsey from the Pentagon’.