



Women and Combat: The Case of the British Military

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The ban on women serving in close combat units in the British military was recently lifted by former Prime Minister David Cameron. This marks a step towards bringing the British military into the modern age.

Background

On 08 July 2016 at the NATO summit in Warsaw, then British Prime Minister David Cameron [publicly announced](#) a long awaited decision by the British military to remove all effective barriers for women to participate in combat jobs in the British Military. The decision came after a two-year in-depth [study](#) that examined multiple facets of the issue of women serving in combat related vocations, such as physiological problems, unit cohesion, recruiting, combat effectiveness, deployability, and survivability.

The study determined that female physiology created a scenario that resulted in higher musculoskeletal injuries in physical training situations, but it also posited a solution. The study further found that a decrease in injuries related to training has a direct impact on the ability for units to deploy and survive in combat situations. Moreover, the majority of injuries would be prevented by changing the way physical training is conducted and the way that combat gear is carried and used. In [an effort to](#) “make the most of all their [women’s] talent”, while still retaining the high quality of the training of military forces, the British Military Service Chiefs have determined that operational standards will not be lowered to suit females who want to serve in combat roles. They propose rigorous communication between soldiers and supervisors, specific training adapted to the physiology of all soldiers, the implementation of cultural

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change and cultural training, leadership training to increase unit cohesion, and a phased implementation of women in combat units.

The move was hailed by many as a progressive step, bringing Britain into the 21st century while aligning the British military with their Canadian, Australian, and United States allies who have already moved to allow women to serve in combat roles. Some critics, however, have cited long-held arguments, now largely disproven, as to why women should not serve in combat roles in the British military. Retired Colonel Richard Kemp, former Commander of the British Forces in Afghanistan in 2003, claimed in several [recent interviews](#) that the inclusion of women in combat roles in the British Military will, inevitably, result in a lowering of training standards to ensure adequate female participation, despite definitive statements made to the contrary by the British Military Service Chiefs. Critics of the move argue that currently only 4.5-5% of British women would be able to pass the requisite physical standards.

However, there is no comparable percentage for British males in the general population that would be able to meet the same standards. Kemp further supposes that those women able to pass the inevitably lower training standards will “become the weak link in an infantry team” thus fostering resentment among their male colleagues, another claim that does not appear to hold up under serious and critical scrutiny.

Arguments Women in Combat

Cartels

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 Servicewomen of the Army Air Corps are pictured on parade at Middle Wallop airfield in Hampshire. The Army Air Corps (AAC) operates alongside the other Combat Arms of the Infantry and Royal Armoured Corps. Combat Arms are those forces that use fire and manoeuvre to engage with the enemy with direct fire systems. The forces providing fire support and operational assistance to the Combat Arms are called Combat Support Forces. ----- © Crown Copyright 2013 Photographer: Peter Davies Image 45156340.jpg from www.defenceimages.mod.uk Use of this image is subject to the terms and conditions of the MoD News Licence at www.defenceimagery.mod.uk/fotoweb/20121001_Crown_copyright_MOD_News_Licence.pdf For latest news visit www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ministry-of-defence Follow us: www.facebook.com/defenceimages www.twitter.com/defenceimages Servicewomen of the Army Air Corps on parade. Image (cropped) via [Flickr](#).

The first type of argument against women serving in combat roles cites the biological limitations of the female body in combat operations. In the case of the British military, criticisms of the biological limitations of women are frequently related to physiology. Essentially, the arguments against women serving in combat relate to the frequency of musculoskeletal injuries caused by disproportionate upper body strength and lower load bearing ability seen in training. While raw data obtained from a two-year study tends to support the assertion that females are more prone to musculoskeletal injuries during training, the solution to the issue is not to deny women the opportunity to serve in combat roles, but to modify physical fitness training so that the potential for injury is minimized while the benefit to physical fitness is maximized. [Studies](#) of modified physical fitness training has shown to reduce injuries by over 47% among **both** men and women.

The second type of argument against women serving in combat roles cites the psychological limitations of female psyche in combat operations. In particular, these arguments stress the sensitivity of women, their “natural”

tendency to nurture, and an asserted inability to perform under intense pressure. Setting aside the fact not all women are nurturers, it has been proven time and again that women can and do perform well in combat. Women have seen combat in both Iraq and Afghanistan, largely due to guerilla warfare and insurgency tactics, and have performed well in those instances. In one case, USMC 2nd Lieutenant Rebecca Turpin was directing a convoy that fell victim to multiple IEDs and an ambush but successfully escaped the situation with her convoy, receiving the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with a distinction for valor. In another case, US Army PFC Monica Lin Brown was awarded the Silver Star for providing lifesaving medical care under direct mortar fire ([6 women who fought in direct combat](#)). Furthermore, [studies](#) in the US have shown that women and men who experience combat develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at similar rates, but note that males disproportionately deal with this trauma by turning to alcohol and violence while females tend to take advantage of available mental health resources.

A third type of argument against women serving in combat roles cites the biological effects that the physical presence of women will have on male soldiers. Critics like Colonel Kemp have claimed that the presence of a female in a combat unit will distract male soldiers because the development of romantic feelings is inevitable in such circumstances. These arguments rest on a few critical assumptions: 1) that all male soldiers are heterosexual (and not attracted to their male colleagues), 2) that male soldiers will find any female in their combat unit romantically attractive, and 3) that male soldiers will not be able to control their own desires when they encounter female soldiers. Biological effects arguments also include arguments claiming that the inclusion of women in combat roles will increase incidences of sexual assault in combat units. Some arguments further claim that, because many of the military

actions in the world today are occurring in cultures that prize heteronormativity, female soldiers will not be accorded the same respect as male soldiers, and in fact, may be victims of sexual assault if captured. This phenomenon that has anecdotally and repeatedly been shown to be a false assumption not based on an understanding of cultural practices in these regions that view all soldiers, regardless of sex, in a masculine sense. These arguments are a shrouded attempt at victim blaming, in which it is the fault of the sexual assault victim that she (or he) was assaulted in the first place, rather than placing the onus for the act on the perpetrator. The remedy for the phenomenon of combat rape is two-fold: develop reporting procedures that not only protect the victim but also vigorously prosecute cases of sexual assault if and when they occur, and work to change the pervasive masculinist and sexist culture that is pervasive in military units.

The final strand of arguments against women serving in combat roles cites the *psychological effects* that the physical presence of women will have on male soldiers in combat. These arguments tend to assume that males will see themselves in a chivalrously protective role over their fellow female soldiers, and will experience significant stress when and if those female soldiers are injured or killed in combat. Given the large portion of male combat soldiers returning home with PTSD related to the trauma of seeing their male colleagues injured or killed, it may be that the issue with psychological trauma is not so much the biological sex of the injured soldier but the effect of witnessing the trauma happen in the first place.

Notable Criticism

Kemp's arguments follow four familiar strands of objection that have been argued in all countries where the participation of women in combat has been

the subject of consideration. They assert rather archaic notions of physical and mental inability of women to work effectively with their male counterparts, and emphasize how the well-intentioned male combat soldiers will be forced to change their ways to accommodate females in combat. Notwithstanding the fact that the basis of each of his arguments has been refuted by an intensive, multi-modal, [scientific study](#) of the effects of the participation of women in combat, Kemp and others sharing his sentiments continue arguing against proponents of inclusion [considered to be](#) “politicians desperate to be seen as ‘progressive’, feminist zealots, and ideologues hell-bent on equality of opportunity without exception”.

Current Studies

A study by Ellen Haring ([What Women Bring](#)) found that collective unit intelligence increased with an increase in the percentage of women in the military unit. Her study further showed that, in cases where women were allowed to participate in combat vocations, they performed just as well as, or even better than their male colleagues, earning high distinctions while under direct fire from enemy combatants.

Allowing and encouraging women to take on combat vocations in military units is a large step towards reducing rampant sexism and misogyny in the military. But again, it is only one step. Additional work will need to be done to change a military culture that is traditionally sexist and even misogynistic. Time will tell if the British military will have the same success of integrating female soldiers into combat vocations as Australia, Canada, and to a lesser extent, the United States. Two things are certain, however: The British military is well informed on how to make the transition as easy and as effective as possible, and they are

not afraid of making the changes necessary to bring the British military into the modern age.

Image by Defence Images/Flickr

Lisa DeLance is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of California, Riverside studying Mesoamerican Archaeology. Her dissertation project examines the social and political implications for the use and deposition of ceramic figurines at the site of Cahal Pech, Belize. As a graduate student, she authored the entry for “Women in Combat” for the international Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies, published in 2016. She obtained her Bachelor’s degree from the University of Minnesota in Sociology of Law, Crime, and Deviance where her research focused on gendered power relations during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. An Iraq War veteran, DeLance is especially interested in the institutionalized use of power and the intersections between the use of power, gender, and sexuality.

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