WOMEN IN THE MILITARY

WOMEN HAVE OFFICIALLY SERVED in the U.S. military for over a century—since 1901. During most of this time, their service, although of great value to their nation, was limited to ancillary roles and was constrained by law and policy. In 1973, this began to change, when the expiration of the Selective Service Act brought the draft to an end. The era of the all-volunteer force has resulted in slow but steady growth in the numbers of women serving in the military—from under two percent in 1972 to about 15 percent at the start of 2002—and the movement of women into an increasing number of military occupations.

In 1991, women’s extraordinarily fine service during the Persian Gulf War—more than 41,000 deployed to the combat zone—opened the way for the repeal of laws that prevented them from serving on aircraft with combat missions or as permanent crew members aboard combat ships (destroyers, aircraft carriers, etc.). Today, more than 10,000 Navy and Marine Corps women serve aboard combat ships; women of all the services are involved in combat air missions as pilots, navigators, and crew members; and women are serving in peacekeeping operations around the world. Their presence in military actions, such as the war in Afghanistan, is no longer considered remarkable; in fact, it is routine.

Now that women are serving in air and sea units with combat missions and also in combat support occupations that bring them routinely into combat zones, they face dangers that only men faced previously. Navy women were among those detained by China in 2001 after the incident in which a damaged U.S. Navy patrol plane was forced to land in Chinese territory. Two women sailors were among those killed during the terrorist attack on USS Cole in 2000, and a woman Marine in an aircrew was the first American female casualty of the war in Afghanistan.
While every Department of Defense service has had one woman serving at the three-star level (lieutenant general/vice admiral), the senior woman on active duty at the start of 2002 is a Navy vice admiral. She was the first woman to be promoted to three-star rank in any service and remains the most senior woman ever to serve on active duty.

In spite of women’s gains in the military, however, it remains the only profession in this country in which discrimination based on sex is mandated. Women are banned by national policy from serving in certain units and occupations for no other reason than that they are female. They may not serve in occupations or units whose principal mission is ground combat—these include infantry, armor, most field artillery, and special forces, such as SEALs and rangers. Women also are barred from serving aboard submarines—except in the case of short cruises for training or other temporary duty—because of privacy considerations.

Men, on the other hand, have to register for the draft while women do not. The most recent test of the male-only draft before the Supreme Court occurred in 1981 in *Rostker v. Goldberg*, when the constitutionality of excluding women was upheld. Since that time, many more military units and occupations have opened to women. Given these circumstances, one question that requires more debate is whether men and women should have different responsibilities as citizens with respect to military service. Findings include:

- Women currently constitute nearly 15 percent of U.S. service personnel, but they are not spread evenly through the services or the ranks. The Marine Corps has the smallest percentage of women and the Air Force, the largest (see Table 7-1).
- As of the beginning of 2002, minority women—the majority of them black—accounted for roughly half of all female enlisted personnel in the Department of Defense services overall (the comparable percentage for men was less than one-third). In the Army, where nearly 74,000 women serve, over 46 percent of enlisted women and over 23 percent of women officers are black (see Table 7-1).
- All occupations and positions in the Coast Guard are open to women, as are 99 percent of those in the Air Force. Ninety-six percent of Navy occupations and 91 percent of Navy positions are open to women. However, although most Army and Marine Corps occupations are open to women, a third of Army positions and nearly two-fifths of Marine Corps positions are closed to them (see Figure 7-3).
- Military women (like civilian women workers) are more concentrated than men in a few occupations—for example, administration and