

WOMEN IN COMBAT ROLES?
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The role of women in the armed forces continues to be a subject of considerable debate. Every change made by one of the services in the jobs open to women becomes a news item met with both praise and condemnation. When one considers the many changes made in the last few years, along with the current trend, it seems that we are gradually transitioning to a completely integrated force. Still, the question of whether or not women should be placed in combat units remains extremely controversial.

In this essay I propose to examine the various arguments which support the view that there should be certain limitations placed on the integration of women into the armed forces. I choose this method because it seems to me that the burden of justification should be on those that would exclude women from certain jobs, rather than on those who advocate total equality. My objective is to determine what, if any, limitations should be placed on the use of females in military jobs based on either: a) physical, psychological, or emotional differences; b) social conventions; or c) economic considerations. Let's begin with the argument which advocates limited use of females in combat roles based on their physical capabilities.

There are a number of variations of this theme, all basically asserting the same key point. One commonly heard

argument proposed by proponents of this view might be formalized in this manner:

Argument A

A1 If certain people are physically less capable, then there should be some restrictions placed on their assignment to certain military jobs.

A2 The average woman is physically less capable than the average man.

Conclusion: There should be some restrictions placed on the assignment of women to certain military jobs.

At first glance this argument might seem plausible. There is, however, a sleight-of-hand being used to lead us to a false conclusion. To illustrate, consider the following similarly structured argument (assume the premises are true).

Argument B

B1 If someone has children, then that person should be required to maintain at least \$50,000 in life insurance until the children reach the age of eighteen.

B2 The average plumber in New Jersey has 1.26 children below the age of eighteen.

Conclusion: All plumbers in New Jersey should be required to maintain at least \$50,000 in life insurance.

Notice that Argument B commits the same sleight-of-hand that Argument A does. The trick lies in the fact that there is really no such thing as an "average plumber". An average anything, like a Platonic Form, enjoys only a conceptual, rather than a physical, existence. This is much more

obvious to us in Argument B because we all know that people do not have fractions of children; and it is equally apparent to us that there are likely to be some plumbers in New Jersey who do not have any children. It would, therefore, be ludicrous to require plumbers with no children to abide by the conclusion of this invalid argument. And finally, just as what is true about the average plumber may not be true about any individual plumber, so what is true of the average female might not be true of most females, and certainly is not true of all of them. Specifically then, the fallacy in Argument A lies in taking what may be true about the average female, and concluding that this same quality is true of all females. We must therefore, reject Argument A in this form.

Let's now attempt to modify the argument so that the conclusion is supported by the premises.

Argument C

C1 Most women do not meet the minimum physical standards for military service in combat units.

C2 If most women do not meet the minimum standards for military service in combat units, then all women should be excluded from service in combat units.

Conclusion: All women should be excluded from military service in combat units.

We see immediately that while C1 and C2 support the conclusion, the former is at least questionable, and the latter is patently false. Regarding C1, there is not, at least to my knowledge, a definitive minimum standard of

physical performance specifically for combat units; and were one to be developed, I'm not at all sure that there would be a significant difference in the percentages of men and women who could attain it. More important, however, is the illogical nature of C2. It is ridiculous to conclude that because some women are not physically qualified for certain positions that no women should be permitted in those positions. In fact, although it may be perfectly reasonable to restrict assignments to combat units based on physical standards, it is completely unreasonable and discriminatory to apply those standards only to one particular group. If physical standards are to provide a basis for assignment to combat units, then they must be applied equally to both sexes. We must, therefore, reject those arguments which seek to exclude women from combat roles based on an alleged physical difference.

A second common objection to employing women in combat units rests on an alleged emotional/psychological disparity between men and women. Proponents of this view maintain that women are more nurturing or "motherly" than men are, and that this characteristic will interfere with their ability to "place the mission before the men" when the situation calls for it. Specifically, women are unsuitable for leadership positions in combat because of an inability to make tough battlefield decisions objectively. This argument might be constructed like this:

Argument D

D1 If certain persons are deficient in their ability to make objective decisions regarding matters of life and death, then those persons should be excluded from military positions which are likely to require such decisions (i.e. combat positions).

D2 Women, in virtue of their innate, biological disposition to nurture, will have a more difficult time with these life and death decisions than will men.

Conclusion: Women should be excluded from those military positions (combat specialties) where they are likely to be faced with life and death decisions.

At first glance this argument seems open to the same objection as the previous one: i.e., simply exclude both the men and the women who lack the requisite emotional traits from those specific positions for which they are not suited. This response, however, is not effective because proponents of Argument D can reply that unlike physical ability, which is readily measured, there is no feasible means for measuring one's emotional capability. They conclude, therefore, that because we can't measure it, and because we know it to be a characteristically feminine quality, we have no choice but to exclude females as a group. The first premise in this argument appears incontestable, so let's focus our attention on D2.

There are two questions which must be answered in the affirmative if we are to accept D2. First, is it true that women are innately more nurturing than men; and second, if so, will this adversely interfere with their ability to make

objective decisions on the battlefield? Let's examine each in turn.

The first aspect of the "more nurturing" question that one notices, is that it is not enough simply for women to be more nurturing than men: the reason for their being so must be natural rather than social. For example, if women are required by the conventions of a particular culture to behave in a certain way, then one can't use the fact that they behave in that way as an argument to prove that they should behave in that way. This leaves us with a proposition which is much more difficult to defend: i.e., women are, by their very nature, more nurturing than men. Moreover, those who would defend this view must argue that women are not only more nurturing in a particular role or relationship, such as that of mother and her child, but that women are more nurturing in other associations as well, (e.g. those found in the work place). Obviously, such associations must be either one of two types: with a member of the opposite sex (male/female), or with a member of the same sex (female/female). Before we discuss each type, let's restate the premise under examination: it is affirmed that women are innately more nurturing than men in their relationships with members of the same sex and/or in their relationships with members of the opposite sex. Let's now examine the truth of this contention.

Considering homogeneous relationships first, it seems highly questionable to suppose that the relationships which

women develop with other women are any stronger or more nurturing than the relationships which men develop with other men. In fact, it seems more reasonable to believe that the bonds of friendship which develop between members of the same sex are no different for women than they are for men. Certainly there is no reason to believe that the female "bonding" which occurs through normal association is any stronger than the male bonding which is said to occur. And even if some instances of exceptionally strong ties between females were documented, it is not reasonable to suppose that such relationships are based on some innate disposition. Indeed, if one is going to maintain that women are more nurturing than men, the argument is going to have to be restricted to their relationships with the opposite sex. Yet, however, even this reduced proposition seems to be the very opposite of what we would suppose. When we consider most male/female relationships, such as husband/wife or girlfriend/boyfriend, it is the man--not the women--that is usually considered to be the more protective and nurturing! In fact, this contention that men are more protective of women than they are of other men will form the basis for a separate argument which we will examine in a later discussion on why women should be excluded from combat roles. While it is reasonable to accept that some women might be more nurturing in particular relationships, we must also accept that the same is undoubtedly true of some men. We conclude, therefore, that women are not naturally

disposed to be more nurturing than men are in either their relationships with others of the same or opposite sex.

Based on these discussions, we have no choice but to reject the idea that women have an innate biological disposition to nurture which extends beyond their relationship with their children. And certainly, at a minimum, the argument that women so exceed men in an innate disposition to indiscriminately nurture others as to render them deficient in decision making ability, is one which is clearly untenable. Premise D2 and Argument D must, therefore, be rejected.

Another tack which is sometimes taken by those who would exclude women from combat roles is to argue that although they should be treated equally, our existing social conventions will not permit it. Those who take this position hold that men are simply not prepared to treat male and female soldiers equally; and that in fact, men will invariably be more protective (nurturing) of women because of the traditional male familial role. This propensity of males to be protective of women, they argue, may impede the ability of many males in making rational, objective, battlefield decisions. Simply put, at least until our social conventions change, women will have to be satisfied with roles in the armed forces which reflect those conventions--even if they are wrong. This argument might be formalized as follows.

Argument E

E1 If the male population from which the military strength is drawn is not prepared to treat women equally (because of social conventions), then women must not be permitted into jobs where such unequal treatment might endanger lives (i.e. combat roles).

E2 The U.S. male population is not prepared to treat women equally.

Conclusion: Women should be excluded from combat roles.

There are a number of problems with this argument. First, one might take issue with E2 and argue that the phrase "male population" is only a conceptual entity (much like the plumber with 1.26 children), at least insofar as it can be said to hold beliefs. Even if large numbers of males in the U.S. are so indiscriminately protective of females as to render them incapable of treating men and women equally, I know for a fact that not all are--and I doubt that most are. But as serious as this criticism of Argument E is, there is an even more serious one. Consider the following possible substitute for premise E1 which is similarly structured, but substitutes racial considerations for those of sex.

E1' If the population from which the military is drawn is not prepared to treat blacks (or any race or religious group) equally, then blacks (or all members or that particular group) should be excluded from those jobs where unequal treatment might endanger lives.

One problem with this line of reasoning is that it attempts to separate the military services from the society which they represent. Military institutions do not merely reflect society, they are an important part of it. Military leaders should not allow themselves to be stonewalled by those who refuse to modify immoral behavior, when they recognize such behavior to be immoral. If members of the armed forces are perpetuating prejudicial or immoral actions against a group of people, it is the responsibility of all enlightened persons to do what they can to modify such behavior. Let's see if an example will help clarify this point.

There was deep and widespread resistance to the racial integration of military units when it was first directed by President Truman following World War II. In fact, units were still largely segregated at the beginning of the Korean conflict. Today, however, no one would dispute that such action (i.e., the segregation of units) was blatantly wrong even though we acknowledge that it had widespread support. We are simply not prepared to accept false beliefs as an adequate justification for perpetuating social prejudices or discriminatory actions. As a nation we have come to this conclusion, at least insofar as it pertains to issues of racial prejudice, and hence, we readily reject premise E1'. But the argument supporting sexual discrimination similarly

depends on a willingness to perpetuate discrimination based on a belief we acknowledge to be false. We must also recognize that we can not condone discriminatory sexual practices based on beliefs which have no factual or substantive basis, and which we acknowledge to be false--even if such beliefs are widely held by a certain unenlightened segment of the population. Clearly, the armed forces must provide leadership in effecting positive social change--at least internally--the same way they did with the issue of racial integration. In summary, even if one accepts the dubious claim that most U.S. males are unable to be objective in decisions involving both men and women, one cannot reasonably advocate that the armed services acquiesce in what obviously constitutes flagrantly prejudicial behavior, as E2 would require. Argument E must be rejected.

Another socially based argument that one might offer as a justification for excluding women from combat roles focuses on the likelihood of sexual involvement. Proponents of this position argue that when men and women live and work together for extended periods (e.g. battlefield scenarios), it is inevitable that some will become sexually involved. Sexual involvement among team members, they add, may lead to jealousy, animosity or even hatred--emotions which severely detract from combat readiness and which cannot be tolerated in combat units. We might construct this argument in this way:

Argument F

F1 If men and women live and work together (as is required by members of combat units), some will inevitably become sexually involved.

F2 If some members of a unit become sexually involved, it is likely to cause jealousy, animosity, or hatred among unit members.

F3 If a combat unit experiences jealousy, animosity, or hatred among unit members, then it will suffer a degradation of unit cohesion and effectiveness.

F4 Anything which is likely to cause a degradation in effectiveness or cohesion should be avoided.

Conclusion: Women should be excluded from combat units.

On the surface, this seems to be a powerful argument. The point of contention is premise F2. Is it true that in those organizations where members are involved sexually, that this involvement results in increased animosity? I don't think so, and I believe that there are numerous counterexamples which demonstrate the falsity of this claim.

For example, the Corps of Cadets at the United States Military Academy lives and works together in a restricted environment and is comprised of approximately ten percent women. If F2 were true, then it is likely that the effects it predicts in heterogeneous groups would be magnified in organizations where there exists increased competition for sexual favors. We find, however, that is not the case at West Point, or any of the other service academies. In fact, while many "naysayers" opposed the initial admission of women to the military academies based on similar arguments, time has shown them to be groundless. Likewise, those

combat support units which have integrated women into their force have not suffered an increase in interpersonal animosities. And indeed, the great majority of the workplaces in America employ both men and women in a common work environment without suffering the negative emotions predicted by F2. Governmental organizations such as police departments and fire departments all hire both male and female qualified applicants, apparently without any degradation in effectiveness. Instead of women loosening the bonds of camaraderie between workers, they have themselves become an important part of the social infrastructure. Based on such examples there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that it will be any different in military combat units. Hence, F2 and Argument F must be rejected.

Let's now examine the view that women must be excluded from combat roles because of economic considerations. This argument is similar to a previous one (Argument E), in that proponents of this view concede that although it would be preferable to treat men and women equally, it is simply not practical due to some special considerations: in this case, economic factors. In this age of budget cuts and reduced military spending, they argue, it is not feasible to incur the enormous expenses associated with catering to a group of biologically different individuals. We might formalize the argument this way:

Argument G

G1 If excluding a certain group of biologically different individuals from specific military specialties would save substantial sums of money, then it is reasonable to so exclude them.

G2 Excluding women from combat roles would save a substantial amount of money.

Conclusion: It is reasonable to exclude women from combat roles based on economic considerations.

Obviously, the premise that is questionable in this argument is G2. Proponents of this position cannot be referring to increased expenses that might be incurred because of differences in physical strength between men and women, because that argument has been shown to be unsound in a previous discussion (see Argument C). In fact, it is difficult to imagine precisely what economic savings are being referred to in G2. Indeed, it seems more reasonable to argue that the inclusion of women in the recruiting pool would save money. There must be some correlation between the amount of money spent on recruiting and the numbers of prospective recruits from which to draw. It seems that with the addition of females to this group--a considerable increase indeed--that the armed forces would be able to either raise the standards for acceptance (thereby improving the quality of the force), or reduce the money spent on the recruiting effort, or both. As the available recruiting pool is reduced with the changing national demographics, should combat units accept substandard fills, or even empty positions, rather than accepting women? No matter how one

answers this question, however, the premise that it is not economically sound to admit women to combat jobs seems patently false.

There seems to be no good reason to exclude females from filling combat roles in our armed forces. Those who oppose such a change based on intuition, tradition, or a delusion regarding the masculine role, must forgo this view in the face of rational analysis. The armed forces should stop discriminatory hiring practices for combat positions.

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