

Assessing the Implications of Possible Changes to Women in Service Restrictions

A Quick-Look Analysis of Survey Results

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Executive summary

Current Department of Defense (DOD) policies exclude women from ground combat service. In compliance with these policies, the Marine Corps restricts women from classification into combat arms (infantry, artillery, and armor) Primary Military Occupational Specialties (PMOSs) and assignments below the division level in the Ground Combat Element (GCE).¹ The Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps (ACMC) asked CNA to examine these policies in order to (1) help inform a decision about whether to change them and (2) better understand how policy changes could affect the Corps' recruiting, manpower management, and training processes. As part of our study, we developed a force survey to solicit Marines' views about current policies and their perceptions about some of the benefits and concerns that may be associated with changing them. The Marine Corps fielded the survey from May 30, 2012 to August 31, 2012. Once the survey closed, the Marine Corps provided us with the de-identified data collected from survey respondents matched with Operational Data Store Enterprise (ODSE) data. This document, which is being provided to Marine Corps leaders about three weeks after we received the data, presents our preliminary "quick-look" analysis of the survey's results.

Number of women personally interested in ground combat

We asked women whether they would be interested in serving in combat arms PMOSs or ground combat units. The answer to this question could help Marine Corps leaders gauge the potential number of women who would seek ground combat service if current policies were to change. The female Marines responded as follows:

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1. One notable exception is that women may serve in the headquarters battery in artillery regiments.

- 1,558 female respondents (about 31 percent) said that they would be interested in a lateral move to a combat arms PMOS if given the opportunity.
- 2,083 female respondents (about 43 percent) said that they would have chosen a combat arms PMOS when they joined the Marine Corps, had it been an option.
- 1,636 female respondents (about 34 percent) said that, if allowed, they would volunteer for a GCE assignment.

Comparison of opinions about prospective policy changes

Overall, we found that for each major group of respondents (including men and women, and across ranks/paygrades):

- Respondents were more favorable toward female service in GCE units than in combat arms PMOSs.
- Respondents were more favorable to voluntary than involuntary female ground combat service.
- Respondents were more favorable to female ground combat service that is limited to those who can meet the physical demands of service.

Combining some of these factors, respondents were most supportive of physically capable women serving in GCE units. Respondents were least supportive of women involuntarily serving in combat arms PMOSs.

Potential effects on recruiting and retention

We asked Marines about recruiting and retention and their relationship to prospective changes to gender-restrictive service policies. To estimate recruiting-related effects of policy changes, we asked Marines how different policies related to women's service would have affected their decisions to join the Corps. Our retention information was gleaned from two questions. Early in the survey, we asked Marines whether they intended to continue in the Corps beyond their current service commitments; later in the survey, we asked them whether prospective policy changes would affect their continuation decisions.

Recruiting

For questions concerning recruiting, we caution that our survey is retrospective because it was fielded only to current active-duty and Selected Reserve Marines. For a more contemporaneous view of potential effects of female service restriction policies on recruiting, it is useful to also consult surveys of the recruitable civilian population. We present results of such surveys in [1]. Here, we present only the results of the present survey. In all cases, note that research finds that stated intentions do not always track well with actual behavior [2, 3].

If women could have volunteered to serve in combat arms PMOSs when they joined the Marine Corps, 17 percent of male Marine respondents indicated that they would not have joined the Corps compared with 5 percent of female Marine respondents. Involuntary classifications of women to combat arms PMOSs was generally viewed more negatively. Among both male and female respondents, 23 percent said that they would not have joined if female classifications to combat arms PMOSs were involuntary.

If female Marines could have volunteered for GCE unit assignments when they joined the Corps, the majority of men and women indicated that they still would have joined. Thirteen percent of men and 3 percent of women said that they would not have joined the Corps if female Marines could have volunteered for GCE unit assignments.

If female Marines could have been involuntarily assigned to ground combat units, 17 percent of male Marine respondents indicated that they would not have joined the Corps. Similarly, 16 percent of female Marine respondents indicated that they would not have joined the Corps if female Marines could have been involuntarily assigned to GCE units.

Retention

When assessing possible retention-related effects of policy changes, we examined only respondents who had indicated in the beginning of the survey that they either planned to continue in the Marine Corps or were undecided about their continuation (83 percent of male respondents and 78 percent of female respondents).

Among respondents, 17 percent of male Marines and 4 percent of female Marines who initially indicated that they either planned to continue in the Corps or were undecided about continuation said that they likely would leave the Corps at their next opportunity if PMOSs were opened to female volunteers. These percentages increased, most dramatically for female Marines, if PMOS classifications were made involuntarily (to 22 percent for male Marines and 17 percent for female Marines.)

Regarding GCE unit assignments, 14 percent of male Marines and 6 percent of female Marines who initially indicated that they either planned to continue in the Corps or were undecided about continuation said that, if GCE units are opened to women who volunteer, they likely would leave the Corps at their next available opportunity. These percentages increased to 17 and 13 percent for male and female Marines, respectively, if female assignments were made involuntarily.²

We also examined stated retention intentions by paygrade/rank, focusing on male Marines who originally stated that they intended to continue in the Corps or were undecided about continuation. Among these respondents, those in the E-3 and E-4 paygrades were most likely to say that policy changes would prompt them to leave the Corps at their next available opportunity. This may be viewed as particularly problematic because lance corporals and corporals constitute the bulk of the first-term reenlistment population.

Anticipated benefits and concerns about opening ground combat to women

The survey also asked respondents about the types of benefits or concerns they would foresee should current gender-based restrictions be lifted. Both male and female respondents mentioned improved career-related opportunities for women, including getting closer to the action, as potential benefits.

2. In the Marine Corps ongoing Exception to Policy (ETP), 13 female officers and 25 female staff noncommissioned officers (SNCOs) have been assigned to closed GCE units at the battalion level involuntarily (i.e., through the Marine Corps' normal assignment processes).

Both male and female respondents mentioned intimate relationships between Marines and male Marines feeling obligated to protect female Marines among their top five concerns about allowing female Marines to be classified into ground combat PMOSs. However, male respondents also included the following among their top five concerns: limited duty affecting unit readiness before deployment, Marines fearing false sexual harassment or assault allegations, and fraternization/some Marines getting preferential treatment. For women, the other top three concerns were enemies targeting women as POWs, risk of sexual harassment or assault, and requirements for billeting and hygiene facilities. Several concerns ranked relatively low in both male and female Marines' prioritizations, including unit combat effectiveness, unit cohesion, and a unit's Marines being in danger (albeit, among men, over 50 percent of respondents indicated that these were concerns as well). In additional questions about their reactions if they personally could have been classified into a ground combat PMOS, female respondents specifically mentioned concerns relating to personal hygiene, acceptance, and physical abilities.