

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 2007		2. REPORT TYPE final		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Assessing the Army's assignment policy for women				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Margaret Harrell; Laura Castaneda; Peter Schirmer; Bryan Hallmark; Jennifer Kavanagh				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) RAND Corporation,1776 Main Street,Santa Monica,CA,90401-3208				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER RAND/RB-9252-OSD	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Captain James Malcom, HQ USAF/A8XP, Room 4D1083, 1070 Air Force Pentagon, Washington, DC, 20330-1070				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Additional authors: Gershwin, Daniel. ; Steinberg, Paul. Online access: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9252/ Summarizes RAND/MG-590-1-OSD: Assessing the assignment policy for Army women					
14. ABSTRACT This research brief summarizes important differences between the U.S. Department of Defense policy on women in the military and that of the U.S. Army and potential areas in which these can be reconciled to better apply to future military operations.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 1	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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Assessing the Army's Assignment Policy for Women

In January 1994, then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin established the U.S. Department of Defense's (DoD's) current assignment policy for women, which excluded women "from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground." The policy also went on to define "direct combat on the ground" as "engaging the 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."

The U.S. Army's own policy for assigning women and its definition of direct combat predate the DoD policy and did not change when DoD policy changed in 1994. Although the Army policy is similar to the DoD policy, it differs in several important ways. First, the Army policy restricts assigning women to units with a "routine" (versus "primary") mission of direct combat. Second, the Army restricts assignment to units that "collocate" with direct combat units. Finally, Army and DoD policies define direct combat differently; the Army policy defines direct combat as involving a risk of capture and includes the phrase "repelling the enemy's assault."

Since 1994, the military has undergone significant technological and organizational transformation, including the Army's transformation to modular brigades and the shift to fighting on nonlinear battlefields. These changes prompted concern about the role of Army women in Iraq and a request that DoD report on the current and future implementation of its policy for assigning military women.

As input to the DoD report, RAND Corporation researchers assessed how much the current assignment policy governing military women is appropriate for, and reflected in, Army doctrine, transformation, and operations in Iraq. The study relied on a number of approaches, including interviews with senior officials from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and the

Abstract

The study finds that neither the Army nor the DoD assignment policy is clearly understandable and that there is no consensus on the "spirit" of the policy across all groups interviewed, that the Army is complying with DoD policy but may not be complying with Army policy, and that some of the language is inappropriate for future military operations and the appropriateness of some aspects of the policy depends on the policymakers' intent.

Army, as well as with members of Congress; data analysis of the roles women have filled in Iraq and those who have received the Combat Action Badge; and an assessment of unit doctrine.

Is There a Shared Interpretation of the Assignment Policy for Army Women?

Based on interviews, we find that neither the Army nor DoD assignment policy for military women is clearly understandable. There is no shared interpretation of many of the words in the policies, including *enemy*, *forward*, *well forward*, and *collocation*.

We also assessed whether there was a shared interpretation of the "spirit" of either policy, presenting interviewees with some potential objectives of the policy derived from the academic literature and current debate and asking them whether such objectives should be reflected in an ideal policy and whether they were reflected in the current policy. The table shows that, although senior defense policymakers fairly consistently portrayed the objectives of an ideal assignment policy, there was no consensus about the objectives of the current policy. Interviews with, and public statements by, congressional members and staff did not reflect consensus in either case (not shown).

Objective	Consensus That Objective Is/Is Not Important	Consensus That Objective Is/Is Not in Current Policy
Maximize operational effectiveness	Is	—
Maximize flexibility of assigning women	Is	—
Maintain current career opportunities for women	Is	NA
Open new career opportunities for women	—	NA
Provide career opportunities to make women competitive with male peers	Is	—
Protect women	Is not	—
Protect men	Is not	—
Simplify unit leadership	Is not	—
Exclude women from ground combat	Is	Is
Exclude women from occupations requiring considerable physical strength	—	—
Reflect consensus; gain buy-in	Is not	—

Note: Based on interviews with 11 senior DoD and Army leaders and policymakers.

Is the Army Complying with the Assignment Policy?

Answering this question requires determining whether women are assigned to maneuver units, whether support units have gained a direct combat mission, and whether support units are either colocated with (in close proximity to) or collocated with (in proximity to and interdependent on) direct combat units. We find that the Army is complying with DoD policy but may not be complying with its own policy.

More specifically, women are not assigned to maneuver units but are assigned to forward support companies (FSCs). The FSCs are attached to maneuver units, and their identity and loyalty appear to be tied to the maneuver unit as well. The FSC chain-of-command unit—the brigade support battalion (BSB)—is often very distant. Still, assigning the FSC to the BSB complies with the assignment policy.

Whether the support units have gained a direct combat mission depends on the interpretation of the phrase *repelling the enemy's assault* in the Army's policy. If individual and small group self-defense equates to repelling the enemy's assault, then support units are conducting direct combat. This would not violate DoD policy, which does not contain the phrase, but it would not comply with Army policy.

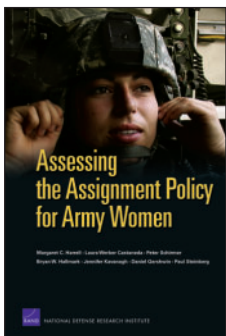
Finally, support units are clearly colocated with direct combat units, but it is unclear whether they are colocated with direct combat units. Neither collocation nor collocation violates DoD policy, but it may not comply with Army policy, depending on the selected definition.

Is the Assignment Policy Appropriate for Future Military Operations?

Our assessment of the policy reveals that some aspects are clearly inappropriate for future military operations: its focus on a defined enemy on a linear battlefield and its restriction against repelling the enemy's assault. The appropriateness of other aspects of the policy depends on policymakers' intent. These aspects include the restrictions both on assigning women to and collocation with direct combat units, the identification of both occupations and units that are closed to women, and the focus on assignment rather than employment.

Recommendations

Given these findings, if DoD decides to continue with an assignment policy for women, the study recommends that it do the following: (1) ensure that the policy is broad enough to reflect current and foreseeable operations and plan to review it periodically; (2) make its objectives or intent clear; (3) clarify how much it should constrain military effectiveness and determine to what extent military efficiency and expediency can overrule it; (4) consider whether it should exclude women from positions in which they have successfully performed in Iraq; (5) consider how much the services' policies should differ from overall DoD policy; (6) determine whether it should restrict women from occupations or from both occupations and units; (7) determine whether collocation and/or collocation are objectionable and clearly define the terms; and (8) consider whether the policy should remain focused on assignment rather than employment. ■



This research brief describes work done for the Forces and Resources Policy Center within RAND National Defense Research Institute and documented in *Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women*, by Margaret C. Harrell, Laura Werber Castaneda, Peter Schirmer, Bryan W. Hallmark, Jennifer Kavanagh, Daniel Gershwin, and Paul Steinberg, MG-590-1-OSD, 2007, 184 pp. (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG590-1/>), \$28.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4150-0. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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