FEMINISM IN THE US MILITARY: A COMPLEX AND EVER-EVOLVING TAPESTRY

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Abstract: The present paper dwells upon the integration of women into the US military, which has been
a long and arduous journey, characterized by both progress and persistent challenges. The main point the paper is attempting to make is that while significant progress has been made in recent decades, issues of gender equality, sexual harassment, and discrimination continue to plague the US armed forces. The conclusion we have been able to reach is that the integration of women into the US military has been a complex and ongoing process. While significant advancement has been made, challenges still remain. By continuing to address these issues and promoting gender equality, the military can ensure that all service members, irrespective of their gender, have the opportunity to serve their country to the fullest extent.

Keywords: women, military, USA, feminism, gender equality

1. Women in the US Armed Forces. A Brief History

The evolution of the feminist movement within the US military is a testament to the resilience and determination of women striving for equality in one of the most traditionally male-dominated institutions of the USA. In light of this truism, the present article explores the historical context, current status, and future challenges of feminism in the US military. To take up a historical perspective, we might commence by stating that women have served in the US military ever since the Revolutionary War, albeit often in non-combat roles such as nurses or clerical workers.

"Of course ... women have always stepped up to defend our country," said Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III during a commemorative event today in the Pentagon. "In our Revolutionary War, women operated behind enemy lines as spies. In the Civil War, some 3,000 women served as nurses for the Union Army. And during World War I, women were translators and accountants, and they operated switchboards." (Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin qtd. in Lopez, 2023).

The Civil War saw an increase in women's participation, with many women disguising themselves as men to fight on the front lines, as noted also by Ashley Gorbulja: "During the Revolutionary War, women played crucial roles despite not being officially enlisted. Estimates suggest that hundreds, if not thousands, of women disguised themselves as men to serve in combat roles or supported the military effort in various ways. While exact numbers are difficult to ascertain, their contributions significantly sustained the war effort" (Gorbulja, 2024). However, it was not until the 20th century that women began to gain more significant roles and recognition in the US armed forces. "From the battlefields of the American Revolution to the deserts of Kuwait, women have been serving in the military in one form or another for more than 200 years. They have had to overcome decades of obstacles to get to where they are today: serving in greater numbers, in combat roles and in leadership positions all around the world", Danielle DeSimone claims (DeSimone, 2023).

The integration of women into the US military has consequently been a gradual process. As previously pointed out, women have served in various capacities since the Civil War, often in roles such as nurses and spies. However, it was not until 1948 that legislation formally allowed women to serve in the military. The 1970s also marked a significant

milestone as women were admitted to military service academies. The 1990s saw further progress with women being allowed to fly combat missions and serve on Navy combat ships.

Nowadays, women serve in every branch of the US military and hold positions that were once exclusively male. They are pilots, vehicle drivers, mechanics, infantry officers, and even members of elite units like the Green Berets. Despite these advancements, women still face significant challenges. They represent only 16% of the total force, with percentages varying across different branches. The Marine Corps has the lowest representation at 8%, while the Air Force has the highest at 19%. Still, there are numerous challenges women face in this male-dominated field, as pointed out also by Robinson and O'Hanlon:

[…] the U.S. military has been one of America's most progressive institutions, as with racial integration in the years after World War II. But it also embodies a traditional, conservative, and in some ways "macho" culture. It's an organization where many (though far from all) jobs require a type of physical strength that is more frequently attainable for the male frame. And the military is, in large part, a deployable institution whose members can face difficult conditions in the field. Women are no less suited to braving such austere conditions and have proved that in combat. But there can be major challenges associated with sending a mix-gender force into such conditions. (Robinson & O'Hanlon, 2020).

To set up a timeline of women's participation in the US military, we might single out the following major historical epochs that marked an evolution in the development of feminism in the US military:

The World Wars: Both World Wars provided opportunities for women to serve in larger numbers, filling crucial roles in support positions and, in some cases, combat roles.

The Post-War Era: After WWII, the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 established women as permanent members of the military, though still with limitations.

The Vietnam War: The Vietnam War saw a further expansion of women's roles, particularly in aviation and intelligence.

The Modern Era: In recent decades, the US military has made significant strides towards gender equality. The 1994 repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy allowed LGBTQ+ individuals to serve openly. In 2013, the Department of Defense lifted the ban on women serving in combat roles.

2. Challenges and Progress in the Field of Women's Rights in the US Military

The integration of women into combat roles has been met with both support and opposition and is still a matter of heated debate, with women facing numerous challenges in this traditionally male-dominated field: "Despite recent military initiatives to address these issues, women still experience unique challenges during military service" (Brown et al., 2021). Critics argue that mixed-gender units can complicate combat operations and question the physical capabilities of women in such roles. Proponents, however, highlight the contributions of women in combat and emphasize the importance of gender equality in the military. The debate continues, with recent nominations and policy changes sparking renewed discussions about the role of women in the military.

Despite many advancements, women in the military still face numerous challenges:

Sexual Assault and Harassment: A pervasive issue in the military, sexual assault and harassment disproportionately affects women. While efforts have been made to address this problem, it remains a serious concern.

Discrimination and Stereotyping: Women may face discrimination and stereotyping, both overt and subtle, which can hinder their career progression and overall well-being.

Physical Fitness Standards: Some argue that physical fitness standards are designed to favor men and may unfairly exclude women.

Balancing Family and Military Life: Women in the military often face unique challenges in balancing family responsibilities with their military duties.

However, there have also been significant strides towards gender equality in the military:

Increased Opportunities: Women now have access to a wider range of roles and positions, including combat roles.

Leadership Positions: More women are assuming leadership positions at all levels of the military.

Policy Changes: Policies have been implemented to address issues of sexual assault, harassment, and discrimination.

Cultural Shift: A growing awareness of gender equality issues within the military has led to a shift in attitudes and behaviors.

3. The Role of Feminism in the US Armed Forces

Feminism has played a crucial role in advocating for women's rights within the military. Feminist organizations have lobbied for policy changes, raised awareness of issues such as sexual assault and harassment, and supported women service members.

The future of feminism in the US military hinges on continued efforts to address gender disparities and promote equality. This includes not only increasing the representation of women in the military but also ensuring that they have equal opportunities for advancement and leadership roles. The military must also work to create an inclusive culture that values the contributions of all service members, regardless of gender. These issues were highlighted as early as 1980 by Eleanor Smeal:

What is the impact of sex discrimination on women in the current military? Women are given fewer educational, training and advancement opportunities than men in the largest single vocational training institution in our country, the military. Approximately 83% of enlisted women are in the four lowest pay grades as compared to 68% of men. The four highest pay grades hold 23% of enlisted men and only 3% of enlisted women. Officer training programs and many specialties are closed to women except in token numbers. Using even the most inclusive measures, 75% of the positions in the military are unavailable to women because they are defined as combat-related or because they are reserved to provide rotational and career progression slots for men. (Smeal, 1980)

Feminism in the US military is a complex and evolving issue. While significant progress has been made, there is still much work to be done to achieve true gender equality. The journey of women in the military is a testament to their strength and determination, and their continued efforts will shape the future of the armed forces.

4. Conclusions

The evolution of feminism within the United States military is both a reflection of and a contributor to broader societal transformations regarding women's rights. Over the past century, the roles and perceptions of women in the military have shifted dramatically, influenced by the dual forces of feminism and military necessity. This essay delves into the pivotal milestones, challenges, and voices that embody the ongoing struggle for equality in the U.S. military.

Historically, women's contributions to the military have been significant, though often unrecognized. During World War I and World War II, women served in auxiliary roles, such as the Army Corps of Nurses and the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). Their service challenged traditional gender norms and laid the groundwork for future advocacy. However, it was not until the feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s that systemic reforms began to take shape. These movements illuminated the military's pervasive gender discrimination,

pushing for policies that allowed women to take on more active roles, including combat positions.

The landmark decision in 2013 that lifted the ban on women serving in combat officially marked a turning point. This policy shift not only opened doors for women but also signaled the military's recognition of their capabilities beyond traditional roles. Although progress has been made, challenges remain. Issues such as sexual harassment, unequal treatment, and the struggle to balance military and family life persist within the ranks.

Feminism in the military has also birthed a new wave of advocates. Organizations like the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) and the Military Women's Memorial have emerged, focusing on policy reform, awareness, and support for female service members. These groups challenge the prevailing norms and demand accountability, emphasizing that feminism in the military is not solely about inclusion but about creating a safe and equitable environment.

Through the lens of intersectionality, it is crucial to recognize that not all experiences of women in the military are the same. Women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from other marginalized communities face unique challenges that are often intertwined with their identities. As feminism continues to evolve in the military context, it must strive to address these disparities to build a truly inclusive force.

In conclusion, feminism in the U.S. military represents an ongoing struggle for recognition, respect, and equality. It champions the need for continued advocacy and reform, urging society to acknowledge the vital contributions of women in the defense of the nation. As the military navigates the complexities of modern warfare and societal expectations, the principles of feminism will remain essential to reshaping its future, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and just military environment for all service members.

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