



CULTURE, GENDER, AND WOMEN IN THE MILITARY: Implications for International Humanitarian Law Compliance



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Capt. Sarah, 799th Air Base Squadron Force Support Flight chief, carries 1st Lt. Ryann, 799th ABS Military Personnel Flight commander, during a police week defender challenge at Creech Air Force Base, Nev., May 14, 2019. Five teams completed a variety of tasks starting with memorial push-ups, followed by other physical and mental challenges, to compete for the quickest race time. / *Photo by: Airman 1st Class Haley Stevens*

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Cover: A Soldier crawls under barbed wire during assessment and selection at Camp Mackall, N.C. Participants were evaluated on individual physical fitness and confidence, intelligence and psychological capability and ability to solve dilemma-based problems individually and as a team. / Photo by: K. Kassens

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Soldiers complete a 5K in preparation for a jungle operations training course at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, May 14, 2021. / Photo by: Spc. Jessica Scott

Executive summary

Since the early 1990s, several legislative changes have facilitated an increase in women's participation in the United States (US) military. The increased number of women in the Armed Forces presents a timely opportunity to examine how the changing gender make-up of the military affects operations and culture, what potential barriers exist, and what women's participation means for compliance with international conventions such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, the foundation of the WPS agenda, which mandates the inclusion of women in all aspects of peace and security. Over the last decade, the US has taken significant steps to implement the WPS agenda: adopting its first WPS National Action Plan (NAP) in 2011, its second NAP in 2016, and Congress passing the Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017. Earlier US implementation efforts through the Department of State and the US Agency for International Development have mostly focused on exogenous factors. In contrast, the WPS Act also faces inward and mandates a government-wide strategy on WPS that improves women's meaningful participation throughout US government departments, agencies and its military.

The WPS Act specifically mandates the Department of Defense (DoD) develop an implementation plan to incorporate aspects of the WPS agenda, including training in "gender considerations and participation by women" for "relevant personnel." In June 2020, the DoD announced its Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan (SFIP) under this legislation. The DoD describes its primary focus as "women's meaningful participation across the development, management

and employment of the joint force." The DoD WPS plan strives to achieve three defense objectives:

1. The Department of Defense exemplifies a diverse organization that allows for women's meaningful participation across the development, management, and employment of the Joint Force.
2. Women in partner nations meaningfully participate and serve at all ranks and in all occupations in defense and security sectors.
3. Partner nation defense and security sectors ensure that women and girls are safe and secure and their human rights are protected, especially during conflict and crisis.

The pursuit of the WPS agenda through these DoD objectives has important implications for IHL. Objectives two and three emphasize the training and conduct of US partner militaries to ensure "the security and safety of their civilians – especially women and girls." Respect for the rule of law, the protection of human rights, and safety and security of civilians places these objectives at the heart of both the WPS agenda and IHL. Instilling military professionalism and adherence to IHL through building partner capacity and the meaningful participation of women further deepens the connection between IHL and WPS.

This research report is the third in a series of outputs of a research program at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, supported by the Principality of Liechtenstein. [Building on prior work](#)¹ that explored the potential synergies between the WPS agenda and IHL, this report examines connections between institutional culture, gender, women's participation, and



Retail Specialist 3rd Class Fangfang Wen, left, originally from China, and Retail Specialist 3rd Class Chloe Nichole Luz Rodriguez, originally from the Philippines, recite the oath of allegiance aboard the guided-missile destroyer USS Mustin (DDG 89) during a United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) naturalization ceremony. The event was the first naturalization ceremony held aboard an active U.S. Navy ship during the COVID-19 pandemic. / Photo by: Ryo Isobe

IHL compliance. We conducted semi-structured interviews with former enlisted personnel, active and retired commissioned officers including US Military Academy graduates, ROTC graduates, and a retired Judge Advocate General (JAG) corps member. These interviews cover different service experiences from the 1980s to summer 2021. Analysis of these 12 interviews (nine women and three men), combined with a comprehensive review of government and military policies, independent review reports, and academic literature, allows us to illustrate how the combination of an entrenched masculinized military culture and overreliance on Special Operations Forces (SOF) presents an obstacle to women's full integration and impedes the implementation of the WPS agenda and IHL compliance.

We begin with an overview of women's roles in the US military, showing women's long history of involvement, recent trends of women's participation, and their roles in combat operations to explore women's influence and roles in decision-making processes. Next, we examine the prevailing culture, illustrating how the harmful expressions of masculinity contribute to an environment that enables sexual harassment and assault. Our findings discuss how the armed services adapted to the increasing number of women by emphasizing physical fitness, combat experience and Special Operations, which complicated women's full and equal participation, attaining senior leadership positions, and wielding influence.

Women in the US military

The **WPS Act** marked a milestone of commitment to women's representation in the military after decades of debate over the role of women in the armed forces. Despite a long history, reaching back to Harriet Tubman during the Civil War, of women volunteering, leading, and forging their way into battle, the first official inclusion of women in the armed forces was only during the First World War. A loophole in the Naval Act of 1916 allowed women to join the armed forces as non-commissioned officers. They served with the title Yeomen (F), performing clerical duties and replacing men who had deployed, and received the same salaries as their male counterparts.²

Approximately 350,000 women served in World War Two, primarily in jobs traditionally viewed for female personnel such as healthcare or administration.³ In 1943, Congress gave the Women's Army Corps (WAC) full status to serve in noncombat positions, with benefits and status set to expire in 1948. President Harry Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act in 1948, allowing women to serve as permanent and regular members of the armed forces while limiting their participation to two percent of the forces in each branch and prohibiting them from attaining senior leadership positions. In 1951, Secretary of Defense George Marshall established the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) to address issues around recruitment, retention, and the well-being of women in the military. This committee focused on issuing policy recommendations to DoD in recognition that it takes a sustained long-term effort to change the culture and norms around women in the military.⁴

The end of conscription and establishment of the all-volunteer force (AVF) in 1973 also eliminated many barriers

for women. Officer training programs on college campuses started accepting women in 1972, and the service academies started accepting women in 1976. Integration of men and women's forces came through Public Law 95-485 in 1978, abolishing WAC. However, in the 1981 case *Rostker v. Goldberg*, the Supreme Court ruled that women could be legally exempted from selected service due to their combat restrictions.⁵

In 1988, the DoD adopted the recommendation of a task force commissioned to address women's inclusion in the armed forces to establish a "risk rule," which stated that "risks of exposure to direct combat, hostile fire, or capture are proper criteria for closing noncombat positions or units to women, provided that . . . such risks are equal to or greater than experienced by combat units in the same theater of operations."⁶ This policy aimed to delineate combat and non-combat roles, but Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm proved applying the risk rule on the battlefield was more complicated than the policy anticipated.⁷ In 1994, DoD rescinded the "risk rule" and instituted the Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule (DGCDAR), which banned women in units below the brigade level with the primary mission of engaging in direct ground combat, as well as four other restrictions.⁸

Recent trends and current numbers

In 2011, President Obama issued Executive Order 13595, which led to the adoption of the National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). The same year, the Obama administration repealed "Don't Ask Don't Tell," which had "barred 'homosexual conduct' but required that individuals, '[...] shall not be asked or required to reveal their sexual orientation.'"⁹ President Obama also allowed transgender

individuals to openly serve in 2016. The Biden administration followed this approach after President Trump had temporarily instituted a ban.

The Military Leadership Diversity Commission issued a report that covered how women's combat exclusion presented barriers to their representation in leadership. As a result, the 2011 National Defense Authorization Act "directed the Secretary of Defense and the service secretaries to conduct a review of all gender-restricting policies."¹⁰ The following year, the Army announced the opening of up to 14,000 combat jobs for women, and in 2013, Congress repealed DGCDAR.

From 2004 to 2018, even with the opening of combat roles for women, the percentage of women in the armed forces has only increased by 1.4 points.¹¹ In 2004, 15.1 percent of all personnel were women, and in 2018, the number rose to 16.5 percent. These numbers differ greatly between the branches of the military.

As of 2018, 19 percent of Army officers and 14 percent of enlisted Army personnel were women, with the Navy at 19 percent women officers and 20 percent enlisted women, the Air Force with 21 percent of officers and 20 percent of enlisted personnel. The Coast Guard's officers are 23 percent women compared to 13 percent enlisted personnel. The Marine Corps lags behind at 8 percent women officers and 9 percent enlisted women.¹²

Combat

The exclusion of women in combat was based on assumptions of biological essentialism, stereotypes and generalizations around women, and a desire to protect the traditionally male space of combat.¹³ This directly impacted the promotions available to women, hindered their professional achievement within military spaces, and hindered progress toward women's equality in broader American society.¹⁴

By the time Congress repealed the combat exclusion policy in 2013, it was already practically meaningless. After 9/11, in the nonlinear battlefields of modern war, there were blurred distinctions as to who and what was considered to be combat engagement. The operation-

al and cultural needs of war stood in tension with the legal rules. In practice, this meant that the US military did not follow DGCDAR, and women served in combat, became prisoners of war, earned medals of valor, and died alongside men. These women were "thanked for their service, and pushed out the door."¹⁵ The blurred lines of the combat exclusion policy were most readily apparent with the US Army "Lioness" teams in Iraq and the Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan, both of which were all volunteer female exclusive units. The DoD relied on them for counterinsurgency missions and supporting special forces operations but did not give them explicit combat training because of the combat exclusion policy, which ultimately put them at heightened risk. The DoD also did not consider these missions "combat enough," refusing to give appropriate combat-related pay or consider them for promotions that required combat experience.¹⁶

Despite the reversal of the policy, women are still overcoming obstacles and barriers to full inclusion. Practically, the lack of appropriate personal protective equipment and combat gear has prevented women's full participation and has contributed to higher injury rates and lower retention rates for women.¹⁷ Entrenched cultural norms around physical strength and long-standing disadvantages regarding promotions because of limited experience in a combat arms specialty present further obstacles.

A study conducted through the Joint Special Operations University Center for Special Operations Studies and Research (CSOSR) Research Team addressed concerns regarding the efficacy of gender integrated teams. The *Special Operations Forces Mixed-Gender Elite Teams* (2014) report was directed to conduct research on the impacts of integrating women into small elite forces. They found that there is no evidence to determine that mixed-gender teams cannot effectively accomplish their goals.¹⁸ Since this study, there have been considerable gains in integrating women across the service components and, in a more limited manner, into elite special operations units within the services. However, the military has still not achieved full integration.

Although today's military is much more integrated than in the past, it has taken years for women to advance

to elite combat squadrons, with some roles remaining exclusively male despite the lack of policy barriers. In 2015, women were allowed to pass through Army Ranger School (ARS) on a trial basis, with three women completing the course. As of 2020, over 50 women have graduated from ARS.¹⁹ In 2019, the first woman passed through the Navy SEAL officer and assessment selection committee,²⁰ but despite this, a woman has yet to join the ranks of Navy SEALs.²¹ Also in 2019, the first woman passed the Special Forces Assessment and Selection, which is the first preliminary step to becoming a Green Beret.²² In July 2021, a woman completed the training for the United States Navy special warfare unit for the first time.²³ All these accomplishments move the needle toward full integration of women across the service components in the US military. While their achievements in training are groundbreaking, they are joining thousands of women who served in combat adjacent positions for years.

The formal inclusion of women in combat roles is crucial for integrating women at all levels of the military. The promotion into more senior ranks is a decades-long process usually predicated on meritorious service in combat to rise to the general officer ranks.²⁴ Prioritizing combat arms occupation as criteria for promotion ensures men's domination in the hierarchy of the US military. This is particularly true in the US Army and the Marine Corps. A former officer shared that "It was definitely hostile to women for the most part I think, and it was very difficult for women to achieve the higher ranks because of the institutional bias, for, we want people who have served in combat, and women, for the most part, were banned from that."²⁵ This appears to be by design, as a West Point graduate pointed out: "centering combat opportunities and physical strength as a measure of your leadership ability and competence kept women subordinate."²⁶

The trend toward promotions will take time to correct. In SOF, the lack of female leadership is, according to a former officer, because many commanders were Rangers or Navy SEALs, and "women either couldn't or didn't have time to rise through those levels."²⁷ Women have held many vital jobs in the military but for a long time were not in positions where "the rubber meets the road," but were instead in other roles such as finance,

“Centering combat opportunities and physical strength as a measure of your leadership ability and competence kept women subordinate.”

administration, communication, or logistics.²⁸ So while there are only five women who have reached the 4-star level, this trend toward slower female promotions is changing. A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report indicated that between 2004 and 2018, promotion rates were lower for female enlisted. Still, the promotion rates for female officers were higher compared to their male counterparts.²⁹

It is also important to note that the promotion of women in the military can, unfortunately, fall prey to politics. Gen. Jacqueline D. Van Ovost of the Air Force and Lt. Gen. Laura J. Richardson of the Army had their recommendations for promotion to become 4-star generals held due to fears that President Trump would potentially sabotage their promotions.³⁰ They have since been put forward for promotion by the Biden administration. These cases demonstrate that despite the changing trends in the number of women who are reaching elite and advanced echelons of the US military, they are still subject to political fights explicitly because of their gender.

Influence

Throughout American military history women have had notable and influential roles both inside and out-

side of the structure of the military. Outside of the current force structure, women play active roles as advisors, civilian DoD personnel, and caretakers in military families. Women have significant positions in the DoD, constituting almost half of the department's civilian employees.³¹ Women have reached senior leadership roles as civilian DoD personnel of the military, including positions such as Dr. Kathleen Hicks' current role as the Deputy Secretary of Defense and Christine Wormuth's as Secretary of the Army.

Within the military, women have varying experiences of wielding or lacking influence. The military chain of command presumes that service members understand and obey the hierarchy within the service components. The importance of the chain of command could, in theory, render the dynamics of who has influence less gendered. However, influence and decision-making continue to be gendered because men still make up the majority of officers due to the combat exclusion policy and long-standing lack of women's access to so-called "elite" squads in the military.

Incorporating women into the senior ranks of the military and giving them influence and authority throughout the chain of command can shift the male-normative culture. It is not only about including women but also involves thinking more broadly about how diversity can improve the culture and operational capacity; "the military is more effective, and smarter if we widen the aperture and if we allow anyone who has the competence, character, and commitment to do the job to serve. And there are women, trans people, ESL, Muslim people, who have the competence, character, and commitment to serve."³²

The potential for diversity of the US military is one of its strengths when working across diverse environments, as an interviewee indicated: "Our operating environment today requires all hands on deck, and gender diversity gives us a more complete picture of the operating environment and then they bring that skill set...especially in my field where we're working with the civil society, when I walk in I don't look threatening, so they come to me."³³ Women's inclusion in combat and ethnically, racially, and gender-diverse teams are critical for mission success. Diverse teams can think

more effectively about how to problem solve and can accomplish tasks that all male teams cannot.³⁴ As long as the normative standard for leadership in the military is presumed to be white and male, the lack of influence that women have in the military will only hamper its effectiveness.

Despite policy changes enabling women to move up the chain of command, there are still those who are unwilling to acknowledge said achievements. A Lt. Col. spoke about being promoted to the role of Civil Affairs Operations Chief and a male service member wanted the same job and the Lt. Col. "had to lay down that law as a woman, and he finally got it." She also spoke about the differences between male and female leadership styles that might lead to such discrepancies in influence: "You see how guys beat their chest, and as the military is so type A, the women are not as competitive and don't pose a threat. Guys who are insecure will demean us for being women."³⁵ This speaks to the challenges women face to exert their influence despite the clear command structure.

One female service member spoke about the lack of respect she encountered: "And I would say [...] the sky is blue today, and I think if we, you know, set off fireworks tonight they'll be bright. It was like nothing came out of my mouth. Then the lieutenant Colonel would look at me and he smiled, and he would repeat what I said and that old guy, who was a contractor by then would be like, oh that's a great idea yeah, I like that, I think we could definitely make that happen."³⁶ Others had similar experiences with male counterparts: "Whatever they say is more credible immediately, whereas I have to struggle to make my voice heard, and they don't understand what I just said, but when my male colleague repeated later on in the meeting, 'Oh, what a great idea' I'm like, I just said that."³⁷ Elevating women to leadership roles is only one aspect of ensuring women influence all levels of the military. Their voices need to be heard as well.

Decision-making

Women seeking leadership positions in male-normative institutions face a dilemma because many

individuals equate leadership with men and question women's ability to lead. The long-standing assumption of the military as male normative has led to a scenario in which traits that society most commonly associated with men are seen as the most important traits for leaders and thus decision-makers. To get to a level of decision-making power, women have had to navigate male dominant spaces and develop tactics and strategies that enable them to succeed. In Waldrop's dissertation (2016), "Understanding women leaders in a male-dominated profession: A study of the United States Marine Corps' women generals," she indicates that women have had to cultivate social capital by identifying and affiliating with the existing in-group and to effectively manage gender-bias and stereotypes.³⁸

For women to exert their influence and make decisions that their rank and status in the chain of command afford them, the people around them need to respect their position. While women are gaining seniority, they face discrimination based on their promotions and decision-making capacity. One woman interviewed spoke about her rank not being respected: "Because I was a female, he would keep on throwing the notebook at me to take notes whenever we have like an officer meeting, and I keep on saying we should take turn taking notes, you know, why do I have to be the one, and he would say, you have nice handwriting. I would say no, it's because I'm a woman, right? I had a lot of run-ins with the first sergeant. You know, who was again an older gentleman, and he did not appreciate the fact that I outrank, it doesn't matter that I'm not trying to be disrespectful, but I do outrank him... but it just... there's nothing I could do at the moment for him to like or respect me."³⁹ Irrespective of her rank, the platoon leader still struggled to garner the respect necessary to do her job effectively. It becomes the double bind Waldrop spoke about: When the military gives women decision-making power, they are sometimes not taken seriously by their male counterparts. Superiors promote women to senior positions, but the inclusion process has paid little attention to the difficulties and roadblocks that perpetuate gender subordination. This includes stereotyping women by forcing them into feminized roles such as notetakers.

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Even when occurring in a violent environment, women perpetrating violence can prompt essentialist reactions and lead to punishment. The violation of gendered expectations of women as peaceful garners more media attention. That is why the public knew more about the three enlisted women and retired Army Col. Janis Karpinski, a Brigadier General at the time, involved in the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib than the eight men.⁴⁰

Without absolving Karpinski or any of the other women involved in the torture of prisoners, it is important to contextualize their actions. Being a woman with decision-making authority in the military is a double-edged sword. Women have limited opportunity to rise through the chain of command. Karpinski was the only female commander in Iraq and was put in charge of 16 US military prisons but her superiors provided no specific training for such a difficult role; Karpinski was also only one of two officers punished over the torture.⁴¹ Notably, the subsequent reveal of the "torture memos" indicated that top-level government officials had sanctioned the abuse of prisoners.⁴² However, because of gendered expectations, women's transgressions make them easy scapegoats. They become an archetype of the fallen woman and are an example of womanhood gone wrong.

Women are expected to integrate seamlessly into the military and its culture but are also presumed to be



Lt. Mely Rodriguez, from Miramar, Florida, stands watch as the conning officer on the bridge of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70), June 26, 2021. Carl Vinson is currently underway conducting routine maritime operations in U.S. 3rd Fleet. / Photo by: Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Isaiah Williams

more peaceful. A retired Major General we interviewed spoke to this difficulty and why it might be too presumptuous to assume women will make units less violent. “It would have a good effect on it, but 20 percent of guards at Abu Ghraib were female. The leadership piece is what’s required. To some degree, you might imagine the women in the US force were under two kinds of pressure, from their male counterparts to be a part of the team and to do the naughty stuff in this case,

as well as from the prisoners.”⁴³ The decision-making power that women can and should hold in the military is important because diverse teams and diverse leadership make the military more efficient and operationally agile, not because women will be the moral compass of any given unit. Expecting women to provide moral guidance falsely assumes women to be more righteous and suggests an unrealistic view of existing military culture and sets women up for failure.

Environment, culture, and values

Like any organization or institution, the military has a unique organizational culture and subcultures that reflect the shared and learned values, beliefs, and attitudes of its members.⁴⁴ Institutional culture, a collection of written and unwritten rules and traditions, is the system of reference by which members of an organization interpret events and behaviors. Organizations' members must understand, adopt, and practice the prevailing norms, values, and behaviors to earn promotions or receive resources.⁴⁵ The standards and values members hold shape organizations' behavior and decisions. That is why organizations often exhibit consistent patterns in their behaviors, processes, and decision-making. Individuals tend to respond in terms of their behavior to what worked and was expected in the past. Put differently, entrenched assumptions and collective beliefs influence organizational behavior and decision-making.⁴⁶ Scholars have highlighted that masculinity is integral to military culture.⁴⁷ Part of this masculine culture is the structural advantages men have in terms of numbers, opportunities, division of labor, and hierarchical divisions of power.⁴⁸ Our interview partners all agreed that the military is a masculinized institution. In particular, they often implicitly or explicitly referred to an environment of pervasive sexual harassment and assault.

Sexual harassment and assault

Despite decades of zero tolerance policies, sexual harassment and assault have long been a threat to the safety of US military personnel, and particularly to enlisted women. Female military personnel are more likely to be sexually assaulted by a fellow soldier than killed in combat.⁴⁹ Formal and informal socialization practices in the military, including sexualized hazing and sexual harassment, create a permissive environ-

ment and encourage sexual assault.⁵⁰ "The military has a well-documented problem, not just now, but is now coming more to light... I have been in some very sexualized climates that created an unhealthy environment. We have some people in leadership who are working to fix it, but that pace of change has been slow. A lot of damage has been done."⁵¹ One former service member remembered that in the 1980s, on Fridays they "used to have strippers on base to entertain...something that seems so foreign now."⁵²

While strippers on base might not be a regular occurrence anymore, the climate remains hostile for women in the armed forces: About one in four active-duty women report experiences of sexual harassment.⁵³ It is particularly damaging when officers enable and promote a hostile culture by objectifying women: "We had a commander in Afghanistan [...], thought he was a great leader, thought very highly of him, then heard, behind closed doors, all the women were imminently rated by him as whether they were someone he'd have sex with and then he would also describe the things he would like to do to the women that he thought he would like to have sex with."⁵⁴ These attitudes are toxic in a culture in which informal socialization plays an outsized role. One interviewee said 90% of cultural/institutional socialization was informal.⁵⁵ Officers, who hold power over others, their careers, and their potential safety in combat, are supposed to be role models, not another potential threat to navigate.

Enlisted soldiers are at a higher risk of assault than officers. A recent survey shows that rates of sexual assault are highest for active-duty women in the lowest pay grades (E-1 to E-4), with almost 1 in 10 experiencing sexual assault in the past year.⁵⁶ Officers acknowledge this too: "It was probably much easier to be a

We heard first-hand accounts of this broken trust. A former service member told us that she did not report when she was assaulted despite being a victim advocate herself because she did not have faith in the system.

female officer than a female enlisted.”⁵⁷ Other officers also believed that their rank protected them: “that rank there that keeps them from being too disrespectful.”⁵⁸ Yet, because sexism and harassment are also pervasive at the academies, many officers experience it too. As one West Point graduate recalled, “every woman at West Point got sexually harassed.”⁵⁹ Once they graduated and became an officer, harassment decreased.⁶⁰

Rank alone, however, is often not enough to avoid potential harassment or assault. Some officers recalled instances where they felt unsafe and changed their behavior to protect themselves: “I had this big old Colonel and he is at the headquarters, and I do run into the headquarters on a daily basis, I have to... log in all the activity that we did, and then I’ll be logging he’d come near me and then he would say you know... things and I’m like, oh my God, so after a while I was scared to go in, because it’s just yucky, but even though he’s not touching me or anything like that you know...the reason I didn’t report the Colonel, I didn’t think anyone would believe me, I didn’t want to be seen as a troublemaker.”⁶¹

“Not wanting to be seen as a troublemaker” is just one of the reasons why underreporting remains a central challenge. In 2018, more than 20,000 service members (13,000 women and 7,500 men) were victims of sexual

assault, yet fewer than 8,000 reported it.⁶² The Independent Review Commission (IRC) report details a broken system that fails survivors and shatters their trust.⁶³ We heard first-hand accounts of this broken trust. A former service member told us that she did not report when she was assaulted despite being a victim advocate herself because she did not have faith in the system.⁶⁴ Another officer’s case was ruled not to be harassment (by an all-male panel) because she had previously considered the perpetrator a friend.⁶⁵ The lack of trust in the system is an important determinant of why so many instances of assault and harassment go unreported.

The hostile and harmful culture within the armed services presents a threat to national security.⁶⁶ First, survivors of sexual assault often suffer adverse mental and physical health outcomes reducing their readiness and ability to serve. Second, sexual assault creates a retention problem because survivors are more likely to leave the military because of their experiences. According to a 2021 RAND report, the services lose at least 8,000 members who choose not to reenlist because of sexual harassment and assault.⁶⁷ Third, sexual assault corrodes unit cohesion and effectiveness. Fourth, sexual assault is costly: mental and physical health care, investigations, separations, and replacement of separated members all drain the services of time and resources. Fifth, sexual assault negatively impacts recruitment. One of our interview partners pointed to the high-profile murder of Private First Class Vanessa Guillen, who had told her family about experiencing sexual harassment before her murder, as one of the reasons why women might be reluctant to join the military.⁶⁸

The IRC report and its recommendations present the latest and most-promising effort to-date to improve the armed services’ prevention of and response to sexual harassment and assault. Over the last decade, the DoD’s efforts to address sexual harassment and assault have included more than ten Inspector General reviews, 50 Secretary of Defense-directed initiatives, over 150 Congressional provisions, more than 200 recommendations from government panels and task forces, and more than 60 Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommendations. Recognizing that legislative efforts have a limit, the IRC report emphasizes prevention, climate, and culture.



U.S. Army Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, complete the “Gut Buster” obstacle at the Camp Buehring, Kuwait Air Assault obstacle course on Thursday, June 6, 2019. The Soldiers, currently deployed in support of Operation Spartan Shield, completed the course in small teams in memory of the 1-8 Soldiers who landed on Utah Beach as part of the D-Day invasion of Normandy. / Photo by: Sgt. Liane Hatch

Congress has also worked to mitigate the issue and professionalize the persecution of serious crimes. Multiple Senators have proposed legislation to curb sexual violence, help survivors navigate the system, and report if that is what they want. In the last 15+ years there have been over 100 pieces of legislation, many of which were bipartisan, introduced in Congress to address the issue of sexual harassment and assault in the military.⁶⁹ For instance, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) introduced the Military Justice Improvement Act (MJIA) in 2013, which has continued to receive bipartisan support in subsequent years. Of the various legislation efforts to prevent sexual harassment and violence, MJIA has been the longest standing and most compre-

hensive. The current bill, introduced in April 2021, is the Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act (MJIIPA) and was co-authored with Senator Ernst.

It would remove the decision to prosecute sexual assault from the chain of command and transfer it to specifically trained military prosecutors.⁷⁰ Besides extensive bipartisan support in both chambers of Congress, MJIIPA has received positive feedback from senior military leaders. The Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act will include the MJIIPA and codify several provisions from the IRC report centered around preventing harassment and assault and changing the prevalent climate and culture.⁷¹

The force changes, the culture stays the same?

The lack of apparent influence that women have in some regions of the military is due to the masculinized nature of the institution itself. As a retired US Army colonel said about women's advancement up the chain of the command, it is an institutional problem: "I see it at senior levels [...] when there's resistance, active resistance, it is very difficult to advance this type of effort and it takes a strong determination to do so."⁷² The military has long been shaped by its absence of women in senior leadership positions, which explains who has value and who has influence.⁷³ The supposed assumption that the military is gender-neutral due to overemphasis on equal physical standards for specific roles and lack of clear gender distinctions in doctrine or the chain of command when in reality, the military institution is male normative.⁷⁴

Society has long conceived of military service, and combat participation in particular, as a rite of passage that "turns boys into men," linking masculinity with ideas of strength, courage, and violence. Military culture, its formal and informal socialization practices, rewards aggressive behavior by explicitly tying together the notions of manhood and violence.⁷⁵ Therefore, the military can be understood as a gendering, gender-granting, or gender-defining organization that implicitly and often explicitly equates being a man with being a soldier vis-a-vis feminine civilians.⁷⁶ The admission of women into the military threatens to erase this gendered division of men as warriors and women as civilians.⁷⁷

The shift to an AVF, allowing women to serve, and opening combat billets to women, including front line positions, blurred the assumed gendered role of the military. To counter this and to defend their hegemonic masculine role, men in the military found new and different ways of defining, measuring, and ranking their manliness.⁷⁸ While the composition of the force might change, men wanted to keep their place atop of the hierarchy. To ensure men maintain their dominance and the hegemony of the warrior masculinity, men and the military as an institution took three primary measures:

- Prioritize certain physical standards such as upper body strength regardless of job requirements that advantage men over women;
- Place a premium on combat experience for promotions curtailing women's pathways to senior leadership positions;
- Give Special Operations, which continue to be almost exclusively men, a central role in US military strategy.

The cult of physical strength

As women were forging paths into the military, men sought ways to differentiate themselves and maintain their dominance in the organizational hierarchy. Physical strength presented an easy and logical solution. After all, who would object to the argument that soldiers have to be physically fit? "The cult of physical strength really rose in parallel with the increase of women's opportunities in the military [...] You can watch those changes over the decades [...] Women at West Point was a wakeup call, and they keep raising the bar for Ranger School and the infantry for physical fitness, and no one is saying it out loud, but by centering physical fitness, you're always going to marginalize women."⁷⁹

For many roles in the modern military, however, the current physical fitness standards are neither a priority nor a necessity. Current and former service members disapprove of the military's insistence on meeting specific physical fitness standards regardless of the job. "So, we've had a fitness program and fitness evaluations that are entirely detached from the requirements of the job. How dumb is that?"⁸⁰ The emphasis on physical fitness has become so entrenched that "now they're stuck, it's so embedded in the culture, that pulling back is 'lowering the standards to increase diversity,' but their standards make no sense in the context of the job!"⁸¹

Notwithstanding the military's prioritization of physical strength, many service members know that physical performance is unrelated to leadership skills: "I had a fat company commander, and no one cared that he was fat, because he was good. I mean, he barely made it

through a mile and a half run and couldn't wait to get a cigarette lit, but he was a good company commander."⁸²

Despite the lifting of DGCDAR and setting of "gender-neutral" occupational standards, women's integration faces challenges. The standards set in the integration implementation plans frequently do not "match the reality individual service members experienced when engaged in combat operations."⁸³ This contributed to misunderstandings and conflation of occupational standards with physical fitness assessments (PFAs). Occupational standards are gender-neutral and test the criteria required for the job. PFAs are gender and age normed because they are an administrative tool to assess overall health and fitness and are not combat-related.⁸⁴ A lack of clear top-down communication explaining the roles and differences of PFAs and occupational standards left a vacuum for social media-fueled rumors and narratives that women were not meeting the standards and that the military would lower its standards to include women. In response, DACOWITS recommended that the Department of Defense communicate the differences between occupational and physical fitness standards.⁸⁵

Women's success over the last decade in completing the US Army's Ranger School and earning the Special Forces tab, including the first woman to earn a Green Beret, has demonstrated that women can clear the bars for exclusive positions and specializations. This is particularly important because the prioritization of physical strength has coincided with two other dynamics that curtail women's opportunities in the military: greater emphasis on combat experience for climbing the ranks and heavy reliance on Special Operations that remain men-dominated.

Special Operations

Special Operations Forces (SOF) operate in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments that are defined by at least one of the following characteristics: high degree of risk, low visibility, clandestine, time sensitivity, requiring regional expertise, and/or conducted with and/or through local forces.⁸⁶ US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) is responsible for training, educating, and equipping all US SOF units.

USSOCOM consists of four components and sub-unified commands, including the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which has operational control over elite units such as Navy SEAL Team 6 and the Army's Delta Force.⁸⁷

SOF's importance has grown substantially since the 1980s. As global US military involvement expanded following 9/11, SOF became a central tool.⁸⁸ SOFs' flexibility, elite skills, and competence have made them indispensable to consecutive administrations. Because of the secrecy of USSOCOM operations, most US citizens do not know where they operate until SOFs withdraw, their success is publicized like Navy SEAL Team 6's role in the killing of Osama Bin Laden, or something goes wrong such as the ambush of Special Forces in Niger in 2017 that killed four soldiers.⁸⁹

The "ideal" SOF member commands a diverse set of skills and characteristics, including brute force, technical proficiency, decisiveness, cognitive abilities, and self-discipline.⁹⁰ The selection for the elite units, such as the "Q course" for Green Berets and Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL, includes some of the most challenging training processes in the world. The combination of self-selection among service members who enter these programs and the attrition in the training programs produces a small group distinguished by their physical and mental strength, rationality, self-reliance, and commitment. They are supposed to be the best of the best. Until 2016, that explicitly excluded women.

The identity of the elite special operator is intertwined with a masculinity rooted in strong assumptions of individual superiority because of the skills, strength, force, intelligence, and technical abilities needed to be a member of the "select few." This contributes to what a 2016 RAND study described as "strong, deep-seated, and intensely felt opposition to opening SOF specialties that have been closed to women."⁹¹ This is not surprising considering interview partners described even West Point as an entrenched hypermasculine fraternity culture, in which women were always reminded they were not cadets but female cadets.⁹² Surveyed SOF members question women's physical and mental capacities to cope with the tasks their units are assigned. Some respondents advocated not just for

In recent years, members of these elite SOF units have repeatedly drawn negative public attention over criminal behavior, conduct, and discipline issues on and off the battlefield.

maintaining “neutral” training standards but improving and setting new standards for everyone.⁹³ Others expressed concern for the established SOF culture: “Women should be educated on what SOF culture is like (make women fit SOF as it is, don’t change SOF for women).”⁹⁴

In recent years, members of these elite SOF units have repeatedly drawn negative public attention over criminal behavior, conduct, and discipline issues on and off the battlefield. Several SOFs, including Green Berets, Rangers, and elite units under JSOC command, are stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, which recorded at least 44 soldiers dying in 2020, several by homicide and suicide.⁹⁵ Fort Hood saw 28 soldiers die in 2020, prompting a congressional investigation that indicted the toxic culture at the installation and led to the dismissal of the majority of the chain of command.⁹⁶ Despite a higher body count at Fort Bragg, the House Armed Services Committee has not taken any action. Local law enforcement around Fort Bragg believes SOFs “do what they want.”⁹⁷

In 2013, Rolling Stone magazine reported on potential war crimes by US SOF in Afghanistan,⁹⁸ which was backed up by subsequent reporting from Amnesty International, the United Nations, and the International Committee of the Red Cross.⁹⁹ In 2014,

customs agents arrested a Navy SEAL arriving in Miami with 22 pounds of cocaine in his carry-on luggage.¹⁰⁰ In 2017, three Navy SEALs told reporters about teammates’ rampant drug abuse, including cocaine, methamphetamine, MDMA, and heroin.¹⁰¹ In 2019, a military judge sentenced a Navy SEAL to one year in prison for his role in the hazing death of a Green Beret during deployment in Mali.¹⁰² The same year, commanders in Iraq sent a SEAL platoon home early after a SEAL had allegedly raped a fellow service member.¹⁰³ In 2018, a former Green Beret was charged with murdering an unarmed, suspected Taliban bombmaker.¹⁰⁴ The same year a federal court sentenced two former Green Berets to nine years in prison for two drug trafficking conspiracy counts involving cocaine.¹⁰⁵ In 2019, two other Green Berets faced separate civilian court proceedings for murder and sexual battery of a child respectively.¹⁰⁶

The nature and frequency of crimes by SOF members prompted the SOF commander Gen. Richard Clarke to order a comprehensive review in August 2019. The report, published in 2020, finds a “culture overly focused on force employment and mission accomplishment [which] creates the context or situations allowing for misconduct and unethical behavior to develop within the SOF enterprise.”¹⁰⁷ The report further emphasizes that frequent deployments on short-duration missions disrupted the force generation process separating leaders from their units and compromised teaching, training, and mentoring, contributing to a lack of professionalism, good order, discipline, and accountability. The resulting erosion of leadership, discipline, and accountability has bred a culture of entitlement and indifference to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).¹⁰⁸ However, Gen. Clarke ultimately concluded that USSOCOM does not have a systemic ethics problem.¹⁰⁹

As USSOCOM grew in the post 9/11 context, civilian oversight did not keep up. Former special operators are concerned over the lack of accountability: “Without stronger guidance and oversight from civilian leadership in the Pentagon and Congress, it is unlikely that US Special Operations Command will enact the necessary changes to produce capable and ethical special operations forces.”¹¹⁰

Implications for strategic framework implementation and international humanitarian law compliance

The DoD's Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan (SFIP) outlines tasks for its three long-term objectives. Defense Objective 1 seeks to increase women's participation. To achieve this, the DoD "will identify and adjust policies, programs, and processes."¹¹¹ However, as the interviews highlight, if the US government wants to increase the participation of women across the service components, it needs to do more than just change policies, programs, and processes. The military needs to confront and address an entrenched culture of militarized masculinities throughout the US armed forces. The hegemonic role of male dominated SOFs and the continued normative assumption that soldiers are masculine/men "calls into question the legitimacy of the female soldier."¹¹² This mindset impedes WPS implementation plans by obstructing women's meaningful participation and undermines adherence to IHL.

Defense Objective 2 pledges to work with partner countries on equitable recruitment and deployment of women. This objective will largely take place with US allies and partners to increase women's access to "U.S. security cooperation and assistance programs, resources, training, and education opportunities"¹¹³ and to train partner nations to meaningfully increase women's participation in their defense and security forces. Security cooperation and partnership is a substantial component of the foreign aid the USG pro-

vides and is an essential element of influence in its relationships with many countries around the world.¹¹⁴

The US invests billions of dollars to build "professional, accountable, and capable security forces" in partner countries through its security cooperation program.¹¹⁵ Building partner capacity (BPC) is intended to reduce costly, direct US military involvement. SOFs are central to BPC. In 2014 alone, SOF conducted 176 training events in more than 60 countries involving more than 15,000 foreign soldiers.¹¹⁶

Instilling military professionalism is fundamental to US BPC efforts. Understanding and complying with the laws of armed conflict, IHL, and human rights are supposedly cornerstones of US military professionalism.¹¹⁷ SOFs training foreign militaries are responsible for exemplifying professional conduct, including the adherence to IHL. However, reports suggest that US SOFs can set negative examples for partner militaries.¹¹⁸

The overreliance on SOFs in US military strategy and their importance for BPC give SOFs an outsized role. They have become influential actors on multiple fronts, including setting norms and exemplifying behavior. What US SOFs do, partner militaries often emulate.¹¹⁹ This development poses important implications for both women's participation in the military and IHL compliance.

If US SOFs maintain their hostility towards integrating women and don't improve their culture, the US will fail to accomplish the three SFIP Defense Objectives. The first defense objective explicitly calls for women's meaningful participation across the Joint Forces, which includes US SOFs. For this to be accomplished there need to be structural and cultural changes that disincentivize hostile behavior toward women, effectively enforce policies regarding sexual harassment and assault, and ensure meritocracy in promotions and assignments. Defense Objectives 2 and 3 are about the training and conduct of our partner nations. The US military presents SOFs as the most elite military units in the world. If the US expects its partner nations to hire, train, and equip women at meaningful rates then it must do the same in the units that frequently conduct the training.¹²⁰

If there are no (or very few) women in SOFs conducting BPC efforts, the US will fail at Defense Objective 2. There are still multiple elite units within the US military without women despite the fact that it has been over five years since the end of the combat exclusion policy. US SOFs conduct a very high number of our BPC efforts and are incapable of displaying what female integration should functionally and tactically look like in small elite units. The lack of meaningful participation of women across the US SOFs stands in direct opposition to Defense Objective 2's call for meaningful participation of women at all ranks in our partner nations security and defense forces.

Defense Objective 3 is focused on ensuring partner nations understand and remain committed to IHL and IHRL, which can translate into a more legitimate and lasting peace by providing for "the security and safety of their civilians—especially women and girls."¹²¹ Instilling military professionalism and respect for the rule of law and IHL compliance is at the heart of this WPS objective and an essential function of US SOF training of partner forces. However, allegations of criminal behavior, including violating the laws of armed conflict and IHL, have marred SOFs for years. Successful training of partner nations in integrating gender perspectives into their operations requires efforts on Defense Objectives 1 and 2. To succeed in achieving the WPS objectives and improving training partner nations in IHL compliance and protection of civilians, the US military and SOFs must increase recruitment, retention, and promotion of women and improve their compliance with IHL and IHRL.¹²²

The role of women and diversity

Women, and their potential influence, should not be considered based on a biologically essentialist notion that women are more peaceful or are more inclined to conduct themselves more peacefully or maturely. Women's attainment of influence in the military should be about embracing the strengths of the total population.



Soldiers assigned to the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, known as 'The Old Guard,' participate in the U.S. Army Birthday Run at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, Va., June 14, 2021. / Photo by: Spc. Laura Stephens

Some have argued that increasing the number of women and their role in military leadership could improve decision-making, which could positively impact IHL compliance.¹²³ Multiple interviewees agreed in principle but stressed the importance of a multi-faceted approach to diverse teams in the armed forces to boost compliance with IHL. Others resisted any blanket characterization that women were inherently more peaceful or would automatically improve IHL compliance.

Interviewees emphasized the importance of a holistically diverse force, one that goes beyond tokenism or essentialism. A woman recounted the tokenization she and people of color experienced: “We would laugh about being tokens... So we would joke, ‘Oh hey, you’re the token female today,’ and, ‘Hey, you’re the token black guy today.’”¹²⁴ Tokenism is not equal nor meaningful participation and therefore prevents the tokenized, whether they are women or other minoritized groups, from effectively influencing decisions, tactics, and strategies.

The identities of the women interviewees are multifaceted and cannot be separated from intersecting marginalized identities that they may hold. As such, both women’s experiences in the armed forces and the value of diversity generally must be viewed through an intersectional framework, where specific forms of oppression cannot be considered individually, as marginalized identities are interlinked in oppressive systems.¹²⁵ Women of color or from different national backgrounds also face a set of intersecting challenges that sometimes limit their full participation in the armed forces. An interviewee who is a first-generation immigrant wondered if her colleagues ignored her due to her speaking English as a second language or due to her gender. She noted, “many times, I said to myself, maybe my English isn’t good... But then I started talking to some of my female colleagues, and then they said, yeah, they felt the same way, and their English is perfect.”¹²⁶

Several interviewees described their challenges as LGBTQ+ members of the armed forces. One woman even called her experience prior to the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy a “witch hunt,” where her Lieutenant Commander conducted health and welfare inspections

at “2 am on Sundays to find out if any women were sleeping with women or men sleeping with men, he’s like ‘we’re going to catch these queers.’”¹²⁷ The overlap of misogyny and homophobia is well documented, with queer individuals more likely to experience sexual assault: only 12 percent of military personnel in 2018 did not identify as heterosexual, yet they accounted for 43 percent of all sexually assaulted members of the armed forces.¹²⁸ Transphobia also drastically raises the risk of discrimination and sexual predation. A recent study found that 15.2 percent of transgender women and 30 percent of transgender men surveyed experienced sexual assault while in the military.¹²⁹ In comparison, DoD estimates 6.2 percent of all active-duty women and 0.7 percent of active-duty men may have experienced sexual assault in 2018.¹³⁰

Differences in rank frequently correlate with gender, race, and ethnicity. These differences often intersect to produce a power differential that privileges white male officers and disadvantages enlisted women of color. Hopes that increasing diversity through increased women’s inclusion will improve IHL compliance need to account for these dynamics. Advocates also need to account for the entrenched masculinized nature of the US military and SOFs in particular. Leadership support is fundamental to affecting the necessary changes.

One former colonel highlighted the importance of rethinking not just women’s roles but security and violence more broadly: “We perceive women to just be additive like... she could pat down females who come through this area... Is that important? Yes, but it is a minimalist approach of what ought to be done.”¹³¹ He further explained that diversity in addition to bringing in personnel from different backgrounds and perspectives needs to include reconfiguring and reimagining terms like security and violence to represent the array of lived experiences of those affected by conflict. “We’re thinking about a gendered security participation when we’re talking about the meaningful involvement... We’re talking about how we confront those cultural and structural catalysts to the exclusion of women, and frankly other non-conforming genders... we’re thinking about protection from violence... societal violence, direct violence, but there’s also structural violence and cultural violence.”¹³²

Policy recommendations

To achieve the three SFIP objectives and increase compliance with IHL, the United States armed forces must foster an inclusive environment that encourages the participation of women. Below we provide recommendations to facilitate this focusing on three central issues:

- Ensuring women’s meaningful participation
- Correcting physical standards and barriers
- Addressing sexual assault

Increase the meaningful participation of women

Women constitute only 18 percent of the US military. The resulting overrepresentation of men produces one-sided perspectives, narrow masculine approaches, and limits national and international security policy initiatives. As an interviewee noted, “One or two women is a hardly critical mass and leads to where their voice is probably not heard. Critical mass is one third, and then you see change starting to happen when that involvement occurs.”¹³³ A greater number of women will also discourage their tokenization or essentialization, as a more diverse range of women’s experiences will be represented. Increasing women’s participation is not a panacea, but it is a crucial first step. Membership and service in an institution offer individuals greater opportunities to shape its culture, practices, and policies. Improving gender diversity within the military is key to improving national security policies, compliance with IHL, and implementation of the WPS act.

However, numbers alone are not enough. Increasing the number of women in an institution is a critical

but incomplete step—if women are not *meaningfully integrated*, the benefits of their participation continue to be limited. “Meaningful participation” of women involves promoting them to leadership positions and valuing their input. One interviewee said that “developing international law with women at the table, [they] will think of things men won’t, that’s why it’s important to have diverse voices at the table.”¹³⁴ However, this requires women to be at the table in the first place, in a role where their voices are valued.

Acknowledging the need for women’s inclusion is not sufficient, as institutional barriers still inhibit both their participation and retention in the armed forces.¹³⁵ For example, parenting responsibilities continue to fall primarily on women. This presents a particular challenge for women serving in the military because they struggle to find childcare outside of traditional working hours.¹³⁶ Ensuring women’s meaningful participation requires access to adequate childcare during all operational hours, provision of childcare during deployment, and equality in parental leave policies for men and women.¹³⁷

Correct and communicate physical fitness expectations better

Rooted in a long tradition of insisting on superior physical fitness, many military personnel and civilians frequently expect physical standards to exclude women from serving in all roles. However, today’s conflicts and battlefields pose different challenges, feature different roles, and require different skills, such as operating unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) or semi-autonomous weapons systems, that are disconnected from standard physical fitness requirements. While this is better reflected in the military’s occupational standards,

this remains unclear even to active service members, which presents a significant cultural obstacle for women's integration.¹³⁸

In interviews, current and former service members raised the disconnect between job requirements and physical fitness standards, noting that existing expectations still favor physical strength. Prioritizing physical fitness also has consequences for who can serve in which role, including leadership. Yet, service members stress that physical performance is unrelated to leadership skills.

The DoD should conduct a comprehensive review of its physical fitness requirements and occupational standards for all roles, and in the meantime, communicate the differences between the two. Altering these expectations would not mean “lowering the standards to increase diversity.”¹³⁹ Instead, the DoD should review how its requirements are relevant for the role in question. This might lower expectations of physical strength for some roles or raise expectations in other aspects. Importantly, it could open roles to soldiers previously excluded. This has the potential to positively impact who fills leadership positions. Additionally, deemphasizing physical fitness would help address the culture of toxic masculinity rooted in beliefs of physical superiority.

End impunity for sexual misconduct

Advocates and lawyers have been calling for the removal of military commanders from the decision-making process on persecution of crimes related to sexual assault. Protect Our Defenders, one of the lead advocacy groups working on ending sexual violence in the military, has long advocated for the passage of the Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act.¹⁴⁰ MJIIAP calls for moving the decision to prosecute serious crimes to independent military prosecutors but keeping crimes that are unique to the military within the chain of command. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin indicated his support of this measure, and the bill has support on both sides of the aisle, but the legislation is currently stuck due to opposition from several influential lawmakers.¹⁴¹ The IRC report on Sexual Assault in the Military's Recommendations

Addressing sexual harassment and assault through legislation is critical. However, it needs to be part of a broader cultural change that tackles institutional practices, biases, and hostility towards women.

on Prevention, Climate and Culture, and Victim Care and Support emphasizes that additional measures are needed, such as creating specialized units who are trained to responsibly handle these cases.

Our interviews underscored the necessity of ending impunity for sexual assault and improving the culture of the armed forces. Addressing sexual harassment and assault through legislation is critical. However, it needs to be part of a broader cultural change that tackles institutional practices, biases, and hostility towards women. The IRC report provides important guidance, and implementation of these changes and recommendations will also result in greater compliance with IHL, better training of partner militaries, and a more sustainable and peaceful future. We particularly emphasize two intertwined steps: First, we recommend holding leaders at all levels from company commander to four star general accountable for their actions and inactions. Second, we recommend greater civilian oversight over cultural norm setters such as SOFs. SOFs' centrality to US military strategy, including BPC and combat operations, renders them an important lever for change. Improving civilian oversight will improve SOFs, their conduct and compliance with IHL, their effectiveness, and their readiness for future challenges.¹⁴²

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