



**DR ROBERT U. NAGEL, MS. KINSEY SPEARS, MS. JULIA MAENZA**  
**OCTOBER 2021**



# GENDERED MILITARY CULTURE AND POLICIES FOR CHANGE

## Introduction

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, founded in 2000 through United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, mandates the inclusion of women in all aspects of peace and security. Since its adoption, consecutive US administrations have increased the number of women in the US military. In 2017, the US Congress passed the WPS Act, which requires the Department of Defense (DoD) and other departments and agencies to develop strategies to integrate WPS into their work. In June 2020, the DoD published its Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan (SFIP); its primary focus is “women’s meaningful participation across the development and employment of the joint force.” The first year of implementation recently came to a close since the publication of the SFIP; making it timely to assess how these efforts might affect women who serve, the barriers they face, the military and its culture, and international conventions such as WPS and International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

The DoD’s SFIP strives to achieve three Defense Objectives as part of its implementation of the WPS strategy:

- 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.
- Women in partner nations meaningfully participate and serve at all ranks and in all occupations in defense and security sectors.
- Partner nation defense and security sectors ensure women and girls are safe and secure and that their human rights are protected, especially during conflict and crisis.

The fulfillment of the WPS agenda through these objectives will have important implications for IHL. Objectives 2 and 3 emphasize the training and conduct of US partner militaries to ensure “the security and safety of their civilians—especially women and girls.”<sup>1</sup> Centering respect for the rule of law, protection of human rights, and safety and security of civilians place these objectives at the heart of both the WPS agenda and IHL. Instilling military professionalism and adherence

We find that the combination of an entrenched masculinized military culture and overreliance on Special Operations Forces (SOF) presents an obstacle to integrating women in all military roles and impedes the implementation of the WPS agenda and IHL compliance.

to IHL through building partner capacity and the meaningful participation of women further deepens the connection between IHL and WPS.

This policy brief summarizes key policy implications and recommendations from a research project at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, supported by the Principality of Liechtenstein. The project explores the synergies between the WPS agenda and IHL, focusing on women's participation in national militaries and its consequences for IHL compliance.

In previous reports, we explored the gendered origins of IHL and its connections and overlaps with the WPS agenda's pillars of protection and participation. By focusing on women's participation in the US military, our latest report investigates the connections of institutional culture, gender, women's participation, and IHL compliance. We find that the combination of an entrenched masculinized military culture and overreliance on Special Operations Forces (SOF) presents an obstacle to integrating women in all military roles and impedes

the implementation of the WPS agenda and IHL compliance. We offer three recommendations to improve women's integration, military culture, and compliance with international conventions such as WPS and IHL.

### **Fundamentals of International Humanitarian Law and Women, Peace and Security**

IHL is the set of laws regulating armed conflicts. The most well-known IHL documents, the Geneva Conventions, hold that parties to armed conflict must fight within certain legal bounds and strive to offer protection to both combatants and civilians from excessive violence.<sup>2</sup> Following World War II, the Geneva Conventions were primarily created to regulate interstate war. The conventions are built on a narrow conception of gender roles. For example, men are considered combatants and women victims.<sup>3</sup> As such, IHL is a fundamentally gendered body of law.

The interpretation and application of IHL has changed over time because of the introduction of the Additional Protocols (1977), the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (2001), and international criminal tribunals.<sup>4</sup> Actions rather than "role status" are now the basis for distinguishing between combatants and civilians. However, deeply entrenched gender biases and the unequal experiences of men and women in conflict maintain the gendered nature of IHL. For example, IHL rules regarding sexual violence focus on protecting women, instead of the prohibition of such acts.<sup>5</sup> Women's protection is also a cornerstone of the WPS agenda. UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions frequently equate women with civilians and present them as victims, survivors, nonviolent, peaceful, and in need of protection.<sup>6</sup>

The WPS agenda has also emphasized women's participation in all aspects of peace and security to improve conflict prevention and resolution. WPS resolutions acknowledge women as agents of peace, participants in peace processes, and members of UN peacekeeping missions, but never as combatants. Although resolutions have called for increasing women's participation in

peacekeeping missions, they have not explicitly called for increasing women’s participation in national militaries. However, like the US through its DoD SFIP, governments around the globe have included increasing women’s participation in the military in their National Action Plans (NAP) on UNSCR 1325. For example, Canada has set a target of increasing the share of women in the armed forces from 15 to 25 percent.<sup>7</sup> In 2011, Burundi’s NAP committed to the “initiation and execution of an awareness programme with the objective of recruiting girls into the defence and security corps.”<sup>8</sup> Some argue that increasing the number of women in militaries could positively affect IHL compliance by improving operational decision making.<sup>9</sup>

### Women’s participation in the US military

In the United States, women first officially served as non-commissioned officers performing clerical duties during World War I. During WWII, approximately 350,000 women served primarily in healthcare or administrative roles until Congress allowed the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) to serve in other non-combat positions. Different forms of legal combat exclusions continued to limit women’s opportunities in the armed services until 2013 when Congress’s repeal of the Di-

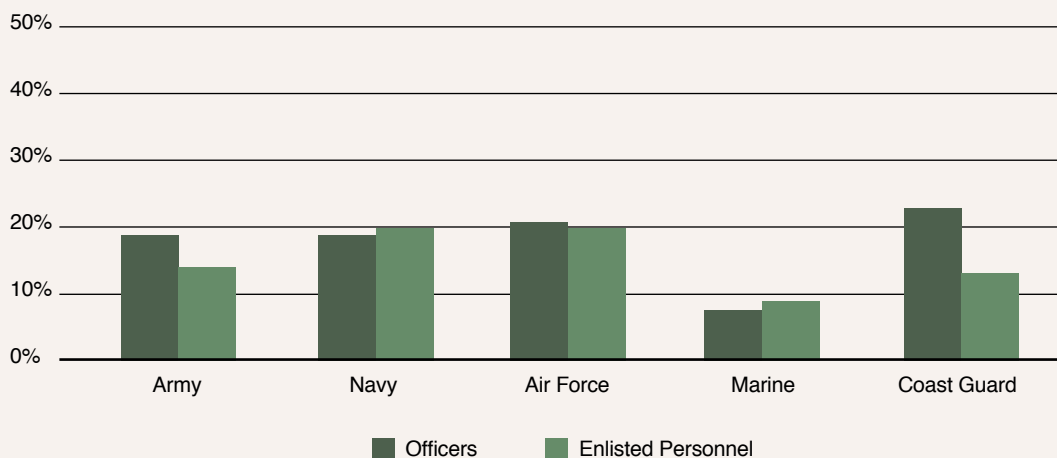
rect Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule (DGCDAR) cleared the way for women’s participation in combat arms specialties.

As of 2018, women made up:

- 19 percent of officers and 14 percent of enlisted personnel in the Army
- 19 percent of officers and 20 percent of enlisted personnel in the Navy
- 21 percent of officers and 20 percent of enlisted personnel in the Air Force
- 8 percent of officers and 9 percent of enlisted personnel in the Marines
- 23 percent of officers and 13 percent of enlisted personnel in the Coast Guard<sup>10</sup>

The “Lioness” teams in Iraq and the Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan demonstrated how women’s full participation in the military offers tactical and strategic advantages. Through conducting female body searches, engaging with local women, gather-

### Percentage of Women in the Armed Forces



Source: Council on Foreign Relations

ing intelligence, influencing professional conduct, and weighing in on planning and decision-making, women's meaningful participation at all levels can make military operations more effective.<sup>11</sup>

Despite legal changes and the steady, albeit slow, increase of women serving in the different branches of the military, women still have to overcome barriers to full inclusion. Lack of appropriate personal protective equipment and combat gear impedes women's full and equal participation. Entrenched cultural norms of prioritizing physical strength and promotion practices favoring combat arms specialties present further challenges.

### **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. Masculinity and beliefs about the masculine characteristics that supposedly make the ideal soldier are central to military culture. This culture often has negative impacts for women ranging from their exclusion in certain occupations to harassment and assault.

Despite decades of stated zero tolerance policies, sexual harassment and assault have long been a threat to US military personnel's safety, particularly that of enlisted women. Women in the US military are more likely to be sexually assaulted by a fellow soldier than killed in combat.<sup>12</sup> Formal and informal socialization practices in the military, including sexualized hazing and sexual harassment, create a permissive environment and encourage sexual assault.<sup>13</sup>

The hostile and harmful culture within the armed services presents a threat to national security.<sup>14</sup> First, survivors of sexual assault often suffer adverse mental and 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 of violence. According to a 2021 RAND report, experiencing sexual harassment or assault increases separation rates over 28 months after an incident. Over the period under investigation, the services lost at least 8,000 members who chose not to reenlist because of sexual harassment and assault.<sup>15</sup> 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 as women are reluctant to join an organization where their colleagues threaten them.

Another central component of masculinized military culture is prioritizing physical strength that advantages men and disadvantages women. "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."<sup>16</sup>

A third dynamic shaping military culture and paths available to women in the service branches is the increasing reliance on Special Operations Forces (SOF), the units slowest to integrate women. Since the 1980s, SOF's importance to global US military strategy has grown significantly.<sup>17</sup> Special operations are often high risk and clandestine.<sup>18</sup> Their missions are classified and only made public in some cases of success, for example, Navy SEAL Team 6's role in killing Osama Bin Laden or when something goes wrong, such as the ambush of Special Forces in Niger in 2017 that killed four soldiers.<sup>19</sup>

The elite status of SOFs, special treatment, access to latest technology, and their central role in US military strategy has contributed to what US Special Operations Command identified as "an unhealthy sense of entitlement" in its comprehensive review.<sup>20</sup> The seg-

regation of SOFs from other force components has enabled a masculinized subculture out of step with the DoD's WPS implementation plans. SOFs hold "strong, deep-seated, and intensely felt opposition to opening SOF specialities that have been closed to women."<sup>21</sup> SOF members question women's physical and mental capacities to cope with the tasks their units are assigned. In a 2016 RAND study, some advocated not just for maintaining "neutral" training standards but improving and setting new standards for everyone. 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.)"<sup>22</sup>

### Implications

The DoD calls for the meaningful participation of women across the Joint Force, which includes US SOF. Because SOFs play a central role in the US security cooperation program, the integration of women is particularly important as it lays the foundation for achieving other objectives. The US invests billions of dollars to build partner capacity (BPC), i.e. professional, accountable, and capable security forces in partner countries, to reduce costly, direct US military involvement. In 2014 alone, SOFs conducted 176 training events in more than 60 countries involving more than 15,000 foreign soldiers,<sup>23</sup> which illustrates the centrality of SOFs to BPC. Therefore, women's integration into SOFs combined with SOF conduct and attitudes are important to achieve the DoD's strategic implementation objectives.

As part of the DoD WPS implementation plan, BPC is supposed to include efforts to ensure women in partner nations are meaningfully participating and serving at all ranks and in all occupations in the defense and security sectors. This goal is at risk if the SOF units that frequently conduct these trainings resist the integration of women and continue to cultivate an environment hostile to women. There are still multiple elite units within the US military without women although it has been over five years since the end of the combat exclusion policy. The lack of meaningful

participation of women across SOFs stands in direct opposition to the DoD's calls for women's meaningful participation across the Joint Force.

Similarly, Defense Objective 3 is focused on promoting partner nations' understanding of and commitment to IHL, ensuring "the security and safety of their civilians - especially women and girls."<sup>24</sup> Instilling military professionalism and respect for the rule of law and IHL compliance is at the heart of this WPS objective and a key function of BPC and 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.<sup>25</sup> To succeed in achieving WPS objectives and improve training partner nations in IHL compliance and protection of civilians, it is critical that the US military and SOFs, particularly, increase recruitment, retention, and promotion of women and improve their compliance with IHL and IHRL.

### Policies for change

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 focusing on three central issues:

#### *Ensuring women's meaningful participation*

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 will continue to be limited. "Meaningful participation" of women involves promoting them to leadership positions,

ensuring they have influence, and valuing their input: “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.”<sup>26</sup>

Acknowledging the need for women’s inclusion and meaningful participation is insufficient, as institutional barriers still inhibit their participation and retention in the armed forces.<sup>27</sup> For example, parenting responsibilities continue to fall primarily on women. This presents a challenge for women serving in the military, because they struggle to find childcare outside of traditional working hours.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Correcting and communicating physical fitness expectations better*

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 other 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, the difference between occupational standards and physical fitness assessments remains unclear even to active service members, which presents a significant cultural obstacle for women’s integration.<sup>30</sup>

Military leadership must improve its communication of the difference between gender-neutral occupational

standards and physical fitness assessments that are gender- and age-normed because they are an administrative tool to assess overall health and fitness.<sup>31</sup> Deemphasizing physical strength would also help address the culture of toxic masculinity rooted in beliefs of physical superiority.

#### *Improving conduct and culture*

Addressing sexual harassment and assault through legislation such as the Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act is critical in improving conduct.<sup>32</sup> However, it needs to be part of a broader cultural change that tackles institutional practices, biases, and hostility towards women. The recent Independent Review Commission report highlights the importance of qualitative data for selecting, developing, and evaluating leaders and incorporating sexual harassment and sexual assault in readiness tracking and reporting.<sup>33</sup> Focusing internally on sexual violence in the US military’s implementation of the WPS agenda will also result in greater compliance with IHL in external engagements, better training of partner militaries, and a more sustainable and peaceful future.

We particularly emphasize two intertwined steps: First, 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 essential lever for change. Improving civilian oversight will improve SOFs’ conduct and compliance with IHL, effectiveness, and readiness for future challenges.

# Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Jeni Klugman, Robert U. Nagel, Mara Redlich Revkin, and Orly Maya Stern, “Can the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and International Humanitarian Law Join Forces?” (Washington, DC: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Judith Gardham, “A Feminist Analysis of Certain Aspects of International Humanitarian Law,” *Australian Year Book of International Law* 12 (1992): 265-278.

<sup>4</sup> Significant tribunals include the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, The Special Court for Sierra Leone, and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

<sup>5</sup> Valerie Oosterveld, “Feminist Debates on Civilian Women and International Humanitarian Law,” *Windsor Yearbook of Access to Justice* 27 (2009): 385-402.; IHL also fails to acknowledge men’s vulnerability to sexual violence, entrenching a gendered perpetrator-victim dichotomy.

<sup>6</sup> To date, there have been a total of ten WPS resolutions.; Jeni Klugman, Robert U. Nagel, Mara Redlich Revkin, and Orly Maya Stern, “Can the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and International Humanitarian Law Join Forces?” (Washington, DC: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Government of Canada, “Canada’s National Action Plan, 2017-2022” (Global Affairs Canada, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Government of Burundi, Action Plan for the Implementation of Resolution 1325 (2000) of the Security Council of the United Nations (Gitega: Ministry of National Solidarity, Human Rights, and Gender, Burundi, 2011), 15, [http://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Burundi%20NAP%202011%20\(English\).pdf](http://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Burundi%20NAP%202011%20(English).pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Jeni Klugman, Robert U. Nagel, Mara Redlich Revkin, and Orly Maya Stern, “Can the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and International Humanitarian Law Join Forces?” (Washington, DC: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> “Demographics of the U.S. Military,” Council on Foreign Relations, July 13, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/demographics-us-military>.

<sup>11</sup> Kyleanne Hunter and Emma Moore, “Implementing Women, Peace, and Security Guidance to Systematically Combat Gender-Based Violence in the Military,” Center for a New American Security, May 11, 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/implementing-women-peace-and-security-guidance-to-systematically-combat-gender-based-violence-in-the-military>.; Robert U. Nagel, Kate Fin, Julia Maenza, “Gendered Impacts on Operational Effectiveness of UN Peace Operations,” (Washington, DC: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Kathryn J. Holland, Verónica Caridad Rabelo, and Lilia M. Cortina, “Sexual Assault Training in the Military: Evaluating Efforts to End the ‘Invisible War.’” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 54, 289–303 (2014).

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Jean Wood and Nathaniel Toppelberg, “The persistence of sexual assault within the US military.” *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 5 (2017): 620-633.

<sup>14</sup> Lynn Rosenthal, Debra Houry, Bridgette Bell, Indira Henard, Cindy Dyer, Neil Irvin, Kris Fuhr, Kristina Rose, Meghan Tokash, James Schwenk, James Johnson, Kyleanne Hunter, and Kayla Williams, “Hard Truths and the Duty to Change: Recommendations from the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military,” *Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military*, July 2021.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with a US service member, July 2, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Miriam Matthews, Andrew R. Morral, Terry L. Schell, Matthew Cefalu, Joshua Snoke, and R. J. Briggs, *Organizational Characteristics Associated with Risk of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021). [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1013-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1013-1.html). Also available in print form.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Feickert, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service (May 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Daniella Diaz, “Key senators say they didn’t know the US

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Review*, January 23, 2020, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas S. Szayna et al., “The Integration of Women and Other Excluded Groups into the U.S. Military: The Historical Experience,” In *Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special Operations Forces*, (RAND Corporation, 2015), 78.

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<sup>23</sup> Pat Paterson, “Measuring Military Professionalism in Partner Nations: Guidance for Security Assistance Officials,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 18, no. 2 (2019): 145-163.

<sup>24</sup> United States Department of Defense, *Women, Peace, and Security Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan* (June, 2020), 14, [https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jun/11/2002314428/-1/-1/1/WOMEN\\_PEACE\\_SECURITY\\_STRATEGIC\\_FRAMEWORK\\_IMPLEMENTATION\\_PLAN.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jun/11/2002314428/-1/-1/1/WOMEN_PEACE_SECURITY_STRATEGIC_FRAMEWORK_IMPLEMENTATION_PLAN.PDF).

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with a US service member, June 24, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Kyleanne Hunter, “Shoulder to Shoulder Yet Worlds Apart: Variations in Women’s Integration in the Militaries of France, Norway and the United States,” PhD Diss, (University of Denver, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, *DACOWITS: Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services* (Washington D.C.: Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, 2016).

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<sup>31</sup> Kyleanne Hunter, “‘In Iraq, We Were Never Neutral’: Exploring the Effectiveness of ‘Gender-Neutral’ Standards in a Gendered War,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021): 6-18.

<sup>32</sup> “\*\*\*STATEMENT \*\* Sweeping Military Justice Reform to Be Added to Annual Defense Bill,” Protect our Defenders Blog, July 23, 2021, <https://www.protectourdefenders.com/statement-sweeping-military-justice-reform-to-be-added-to-annual-defense-bill/>.; “Gillibrand Announces Historic Victories Included In Senate NDAA,” Kirsten Gillibrand, United States Senator for New York, July 22, 2021, <https://www.gillibrand.senate.gov/mjia/excluded-offenses>.

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