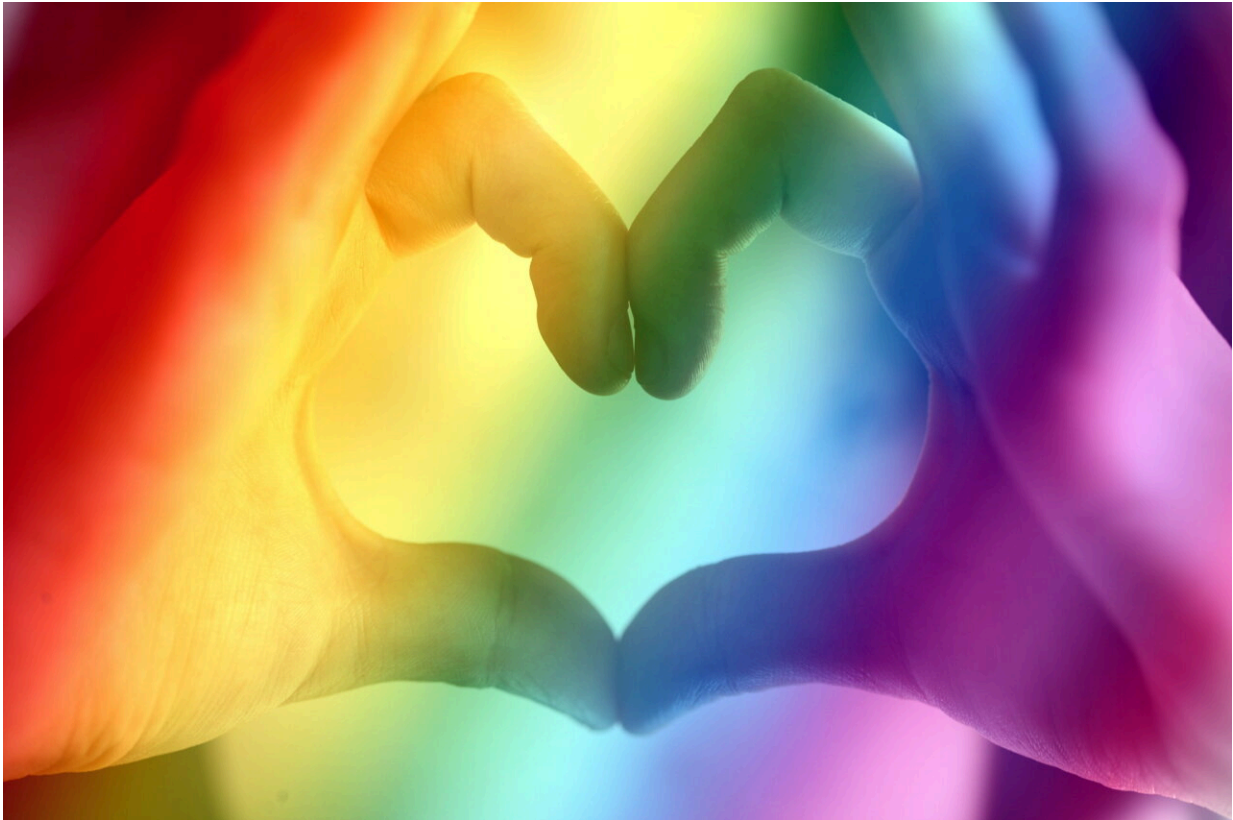


3Qs: Gender equality in the military

January 29 2013, by Jason Kornwitz



Credit: Alexander Grey from Pexels

The Pentagon has lifted the military's official ban on women in combat, a historic decision that President Obama said reflected "the courageous and patriotic service of women through more than two centuries of American history." Northeastern University news office asked Martha Davis, women's rights expert and professor of law, to assess the

decision's impact on gender equality both in and out of the armed forces.

The Pentagon's decision to lift the ban on women in combat has been characterized as a huge win for gender equality. Do you agree?

Yes, I do. This issue has been high on the agenda of [women's](#) groups for many years, not only because of the general message that it sends about women's capacities but also because it will enhance the careers of many women in the military. In addition, it makes sense in terms of ensuring that our military is the best that it can be. We know from many studies that the more diversity in the room the better the decision-making will be—and I think that that will be borne out as women advance through the military ranks and are at the table in greater numbers as important decisions are made.

I have been puzzled in recent years that there has been significant support nationwide to combat discrimination in the military on the basis of [sexual orientation](#)—particularly from many universities that have restricted military activities on campuses—whereas the military has openly discriminated against women for years without significant protest. The lifting of this ban is an important step forward for equality.

Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta in a letter that the "time has come to eliminate all unnecessary gender-based barriers to service." Why do you think the Pentagon and the military made this decision at this particular time?

I think there are two reasons. One is that the military has seen that it

can't operate a volunteer force without being able to engage the best people in the country in all operations where they are needed. The second reason is that women in the military have demonstrated again and again that they can excel and contribute. It has become increasingly clear that the ban on women in combat was not only hard on the military, but that it was also unfair to women who could compete with men but were having career opportunities denied.

The biggest issue going forward will be ensuring that we use what we have learned from other situations in which women were integrated into all predominantly male work environments. We have a lot of knowledge from the police and fire departments about how we can maintain the highest standard of quality while also being fair to individuals who have different capacities. For example, we have to make sure that the physical tests posed by the military are keyed into the actual requirements of the jobs involved.

President Obama spoke of equal rights for all in his second inaugural address. How might lifting the military's ban on women in combat align with his second-term agenda?

I was excited by President Obama's reference in his speech to a range of civil rights concerns. The issue of marriage equality will be taken up by the Supreme Court this term, so it seems that courts will ultimately decide that issue. In this case, it is heartening to see the Obama administration step up ahead of the courts and take leadership on an issue of equality where it does have control and can take definitive action.

This move will also have international ramifications for the U.S. Among other things, it helps clear the way for U.S. ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

We are one of the very few countries in the world that has not ratified this international treaty designed to ensure women's equality. The U.S. can now go before the international community and demonstrate that it is making progress on women's equality and that's certainly a great thing.

Provided by Northeastern University

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