

Military should address gender stereotypes when integrating combat roles, study finds

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Credit: University of Kansas

Even though the Defense Secretary Ash Carter earlier this year formally opened all combat jobs to women, two University of Kansas researchers say the U.S. military needs to work on changing significant cultural aspects to fully integrate women in the armed forces.

"The challenging work begins during policy implementation, which

includes breaking down assumptions that are part of leadership within the organization and working on shifting the mindset of the military," said Alesha Doan, associate professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration and Department of Political Science. "Ultimately we argue that the military should consider implementing training that directly addresses the pervasive stereotypes and cultural understandings of gender."

Doan and co-author Shannon Portillo, also an associate professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration, published their findings recently in the journal *Sex Roles*. Based on 28 focus groups, they interviewed 198 soldiers and conducted surveys with 1,701 men and 214 women all involved in jobs with the U.S. Army Special Forces, an elite component of Special Operations Command commonly known as the Green Berets. The research was conducted from October 2013 to February 2014 at Fort Bragg in North Carolina and Fort Leavenworth in Kansas.

Female participants in the study came from units that all serve as support for Special Forces when they are deployed. For example, Civil Affairs personnel focus on engaging with local populations and building strategic connections with local leaders.

The researchers found that ascribed gender identity was fluid for [female soldiers](#) and static for male soldiers. Many female soldiers reported being scrutinized due to their gender by fellow male soldiers, based on stereotypes about their job performance, while populations outside the United States they worked with on deployment tended not to do so.

Male soldiers, though, still acted to reinforce strict gender hierarchies.

"Female soldiers' experiences are important because they often refute some of the stereotypes and assumptions their male colleagues may hold

about women's ability to serve in combat units," Portillo said.

The researchers said these attitudes could cause military leaders to rely on assumptions and hypothetical scenarios to guide certain decisions on gendered policies and practices rather than evidence-based reasoning.

"As combat forces integrate, it is important for soldiers to understand the experience of women fighting alongside them, rather than relying on stereotypes or assumptions about gender," Portillo said.

The researchers said military men are often positioned as gatekeepers to women's acceptance within Special Forces specifically because men still hold a majority of the leadership positions throughout the military, and traditionally leaders' experiences have mirrored the identity and experience of soldiers coming after them. But with recent changes, that is often no longer the case.

"It is important for leaders to recognize and understand perspectives and experiences from vantage points other than their own," Doan said.

Most of the military's gender integration occurs at the unit level, the researchers acknowledged, so male soldiers can create an environment that is either hostile and excluding of women or not.

In revamping how the military trains soldiers to address underlying assumptions of male soldiers, leaders could look to how women soldiers were viewed overseas as a potential point to emphasize.

Through deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan, many female participants in the study mentioned their experiences of accessing women in the Middle East and how indigenous people there often see them as Americans and soldiers first instead of a woman first.

"American female soldiers have the ability to add a new perspective and increase access for the military," Portillo said. "Traditional assumptions about gender were displaced for American women by their identities as [soldiers](#) and Americans. This allowed them to serve as additional assets to the [military](#), without the assumed burdens based on their gender."

More information: Alesha E. Doan et al, Not a Woman, but a Soldier: Exploring Identity through Translocational Positionality, *Sex Roles* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-016-0661-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0661-7)

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