

Entrenched stereotypes keeping women from military front lines, professors' new book says

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For more than a century, it was culturally unacceptable for women to join men in the front lines of combat in the U.S. military. Even though the policy banning women from combat roles has been rescinded, their integration into the front line and special operations has been slow and met with resistance. Two University of Kansas researchers have published a book on factors that have slowed the integration, citing "organizational obliviousness," or entrenched stereotypes as the primary culprit.

Even when military members are supportive of [women](#) taking increased combat roles, ingrained [gender stereotypes](#) of both men and women at several levels have held back progress, wrote Alesha Doan and Shannon Portillo in "Organizational Obliviousness: Entrenched Resistance to Gender Integration in the Military," published by Cambridge University Press. Stereotypes are then normalized by organizational policies and practices, and their subtlety can render them invisible.

Doan, associate professor in KU's School of Public Affairs & Administration and in the Department of Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies, and Portillo, associate professor of public affairs & administration and assistant vice chancellor of undergraduate programs at KU's Edwards Campus, conducted focus groups and surveys with men and women—both enlisted and officers—in the U.S. Army for the brief book.

"We're public administration scholars and the military is the largest public organization in the country, but it is incredibly understudied," Portillo said. "The fall of 2013 was a very special time in the military as the combat ban policy was lifted, but it wasn't clear how it would be

implemented, from a task standpoint, if women would be able to do the same work men in special forces do and how it would work practically."

The authors write that resistance to gender integration exists in the organization at three levels: individual, cultural and institutional.

"Gender stereotypes are ingrained in organizational society writ large, so individuals easily—and often unconsciously—draw on them," Doan said. "Our research findings illuminate how gender stereotypes are frequently used to oppose and resist changes, particularly when the changes have the potential to disrupt an organization's culture and standard operating procedures."

Although some of the respondents were supportive of integrating women into combat roles and Special Forces, they had numerous concerns that were shared by those who opposed gender integration. For example, physical strength was a concern of some soldiers. Many respondents repeated common stereotypes that men are rational thinkers and physically strong while women are emotional and physically weak. Male participants often rationalized that their own wives or girlfriends would not be able to handle the physical demands of special forces; therefore, no women could. Others pointed to a well-known example of four female trainees who were unable to pass a qualification obstacle course as evidence that women couldn't physically pass muster. What they didn't cite was that 75 of 100 men were also unable to pass the course.

Leadership was another common obstacle, the authors found. While men routinely pursue leadership roles, women often put off starting a family until they can reach such roles. However, once they are in a position to advance, they are expected to have families as part of fitting the leadership ideal, creating a catch-22. Mentorship in the Army was also important, as respondents and separate research have indicated quality mentorship especially helps women in the military.

"That parallels what we know about teaching," Portillo said. "Everyone benefits from good teaching, but those from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit even more."

Many men reported wanting to mentor women, but they were afraid to do so for several reasons. Some men said they felt they needed witnesses present when working with women to fend off accusations of impropriety or favoritism, while others said they worried they would be falsely accused of sexual harassment if they tried mentoring women. Both men and women in the study reported the mandatory [sexual harassment](#) training was not helpful, as men said it scared them away from working with women and women reporting it reinforced the idea of their gender as victims. That's despite the fact that men are much more likely to be victims of sexual assault in the military due to sheer numbers.

That those stereotypes existed widely at the individual level was reflected in the cultural level of the organization and was thus represented in policies and practices, the authors wrote. Therefore, even if there is not malice or actions taken to actively exclude or harm others, in the end both happen. Progress is being made in becoming gender-neutral and integrating women into combat roles, say the authors who have previously written about gender stereotypes and combat, but room for improvement remains.

"We argue that obliviousness is not just on a person-to-person basis," Portillo said. "We focus here on gender and how resistance to changes regarding [gender](#) happen throughout the organization, but the concept could be applied to other identities as well. One of the biggest takeaways in the book is entrenched organizational resistance is not just about policy change. It's about the individual and structural practices of the organization. Stereotypes and attitudes are so ingrained in the culture it takes time to change."

More information: Organizational Obliviousness: Entrenched Resistance to Gender Integration in the Military. DOI: doi.org/10.1017/9781108665124

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