

Death of female soldiers does not diminish support for war

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Credit: 123rf.com

The thought of female soldiers dying in combat does not diminish public support for war, according to a new study from Rice University, Harvard University and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"At War and at Home: The Consequences of U.S. Women Combat Casualties" will appear in an upcoming edition of the Journal of Conflict Resolution. The paper examines [public reaction](#) to [female soldiers](#) dying in combat and how women's service in front-line combat impacts views about gender equality.

Researchers Connor Huff, an assistant professor of political science at Rice; Dara Kay Cohen, the Ford Foundation Associate Professor of Public Policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government; and Robert Schub, an assistant professor of political science at Nebraska, drew their conclusions from a nationally representative sample of 1,400 adults in the initial survey and more than 4,000 respondents in follow-up surveys.

"The 2015 decision to open all combat positions was, and still is, a hotly contested policy decision," the authors wrote. "This issue was seemingly reopened in September 2018 by then-Defense Secretary James Mattis when he stated it was unclear whether women serving in combat units was 'a strength or a weakness' and that 'the jury is out.'"

However, the authors noted that many of the claims made about the political and social impact of women in combat have been supported by little or no evidence. This was the impetus for their study.

In the first survey, participants were presented with hypothetical scenarios about male and female soldiers that were injured or killed in combat. These vignettes included deployment/operation particulars, details about the opponent and personal information about the soldiers. Importantly, the researchers varied the sex of the front-line [soldier](#) from participant to participant. After reading these scenarios, the participants were surveyed about their support for the operation, including whether they agreed with the following statement: "In light of what happened, the United States made a mistake sending in the ... soldiers." The results

showed that female combat deaths did not diminish support for war among either men or women.

The researchers also asked respondents for their thoughts on gender equality, both in public life and in the private sphere. They were presented with statements to agree or disagree with, including: "On the whole, men make better military/political leaders than women do." Respondents were also asked whether they thought it was "important for men and women to share household work equally." Women who were given a female soldier in their hypothetical vignette—whether she was killed or survived—expressed increased support for gender equality, particularly in public life, but men did not.

"The results suggest that witnessing a woman soldier make a heroic sacrifice can be moving and inspiring to women, by sparking ideas of greater possibilities of [women's](#) potential to lead in new and powerful ways," Huff said.

More information: Dara Kay Cohen et al. At War and at Home: The Consequences of US Women Combat Casualties, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0022002720964952](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002720964952)

Provided by Rice University

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