

## Study finds stark divide between military men, women on gender-neutral bathrooms, reinforcing discrimination

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Two members of a U.S. Marine Corps Female Engagement Team patrol a town in Afghanistan during 2010. Credit: U.S. Marine Corps, Wikicommons.

The introduction of gender-neutral restrooms into public and private spaces is a departure from more than a century of policies put in place to ostensibly "protect" women in business, schools and the military. New University of Kansas research shows a stark divide between men and women in the military in their attitudes about the existence of gender-neutral bathrooms and what they mean for gender-based stereotypes and

discrimination.

In 2013, the Department of Defense lifted a policy banning [women](#) from combat positions. KU scholars conducted a series of surveys and focus groups with soldiers who are part of Army special forces, commonly known as Green Berets, about their thoughts on integration. The research was conducted from October 2013 to February 2014 at Fort Bragg in North Carolina and Fort Leavenworth in Kansas. Less than one-third of men said they would be open to sharing bathrooms with women, while nearly two-thirds of women said they had no objection to it. Those results came from research that didn't originally ask about bathroom policies.

"We weren't focused on bathrooms originally, but they kept coming up, more than 300 times," said Shannon Portillo, associate professor of public affairs & administration and associate dean for academic affairs at KU's Edwards Campus. "We were focused on larger questions of military integration, but we saw a stark gender difference on this topic. The results clearly showed men were concerned about continuing a sex-separated atmosphere."

Portillo co-wrote the study with Alesha Doan, professor of public affairs & administration and in the Department of Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies, and KU alumna Ashley Mog, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The study was recently published in the journal *Armed Forces and Society*.

"When a male-dominated organization makes positive policy changes to reduce gender inequity, it can simultaneously trigger pushback from the rank-and-file men, who may react by attempting to 're-gender' the organization by doubling down on the existing sexist culture," said Doan, noting they found that exact dynamic in their research.

While policies such as the rescinding of a ban of women in combat positions has led to integration, results of the 27 focus groups of special forces members—many deployed to sites such as Iraq and Afghanistan—show there is still resistance and efforts to maintain gender segregation, the authors wrote.

Men frequently cited privacy, risk and hygiene as factors they felt warranted separate facilities. In terms of privacy, however, they only stated they needed privacy from women, not from other men, or to be able to use facilities by themselves. In terms of hygiene and risk, men were focused on menstruation and showed misunderstanding of and revulsion about the topic. Drawing on gender stereotypes, the authors wrote, many men claimed women needed to shower more often or would be emotionally unstable during menstruation and therefore unreliable in their positions.

Women also dispelled the assumption that more financial resources would be necessary to accommodate them as part of special forces and combat units. They dismissed the idea that they needed new bathroom or shower facilities, noting they could use stalls for both toilets and showers, cover with towels when necessary or put a sign on a door that a facility was in use. Others said unisex bathrooms were not an issue as they have used them in other areas of life.

While men commonly said they did not oppose integration of combat forces, their assumptions about bathrooms and women, and statements about needing to protect women from risks, belied a misunderstanding about bathroom policies, how they have been used to keep women out of certain spaces and to continue gender separation and privilege they have grown accustomed to, the authors wrote.

"The men in the focus groups held on to the idea of bathrooms not being neutral. They made clear they were not trying to be sexist but did

acknowledge bathroom policies that have kept women out of certain public spaces for decades," Portillo said. "Women are trying to access a space that has been exclusively male and are willing to adapt to do so. Men said they were OK with it but were not willing to open certain spaces."

The authors also shared a history of American bathroom policy, pointing out how gendered restrooms were first put in place in public in the late 19th century as more women were entering the workforce and a lack of women's restrooms had been used to justify not hiring women, among other discriminatory practices.

The study is the third part of a larger research project Doan and Portillo have undertaken about the integration of combat forces. They previously published a study on [cultural aspects of a male-dominated military](#) and a book on how "organizational obliviousness" has allowed entrenched gender stereotypes to slow integration. And while President Joe Biden recently lifted a ban on transgender individuals openly serving in the military, the studies focused only on cisgender individuals, as the ban was in place at the time of the research.

The findings illustrate how toilets were a focal point for special forces members to attempt to re-establish gender segregation in a changing military atmosphere. That reflects not only what is happening currently as policies are debated to prevent gender-neutral facilities in schools and public places, but the long history of bathrooms being used as a way of keeping women out of certain professions such as policing, Congress, firefighting and others, based on assumptions about privacy, risk and hygiene.

"This is not just something that is contained in the military. There has been a long history of bathroom politics in the workplace," Portillo said. "It's also being discussed in schools, and it all shows us just how much

bathrooms are a part of public life. They have been and are being used as a way to maintain segregation."

**More information:** Shannon Portillo et al. Maintaining Male Exclusivity: Porcelain Privilege in the Military, *Armed Forces & Society* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/0095327X21992369](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X21992369)

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