

GAO

Report to the Ranking Minority Member,  
Subcommittee on Readiness, Committee  
on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

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October 1998

# GENDER ISSUES

## Information on DOD's Assignment Policy and Direct Ground Combat Definition



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**United States  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548**

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**National Security and  
International Affairs Division**

B-280994

October 19, 1998

The Honorable Charles S. Robb  
Ranking Minority Member  
Subcommittee on Readiness  
Committee on Armed Services  
United States Senate

Dear Senator Robb:

At your request, we are reviewing various issues pertaining to the treatment of men and women in the armed forces. This report focuses on your separate but related questions regarding the Department of Defense's (DOD) policy that excludes women from direct ground combat and its definition of direct ground combat. Specifically, we determined (1) the numbers and types of positions that are closed to women and the associated justifications for closure, (2) DOD's current rationale for excluding women from direct ground combat, and (3) the relationship of DOD's definition of direct ground combat to current military operations. We did not evaluate the appropriateness of DOD's direct ground combat exclusion rationale.

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## Background

Opportunities for servicewomen have increased dramatically since 1948, when the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 gave women a permanent place in the military services. However, the act excluded women from serving on Navy ships (except hospital ships and transports) and aircraft engaged in combat missions. Because the Marine Corps is a naval oriented air and ground combat force, the exclusion of women from Navy ships essentially barred them from combat positions in the Marine Corps as well. The Women's Army Corps already excluded women from combat positions, eliminating the need for a separate statute for Army servicewomen.

During the 1970s, Congress and the services created more opportunities for women in the military. In 1974, the age requirement for enlistment without parental consent became the same for men and women. Then, in 1976, women were admitted to the Air Force Academy, the Naval Academy, and the Military Academy. In 1977, the Army implemented a policy that essentially opened many previously closed occupations, including some aviation assignments, but formally closed combat positions to women. Finally, in 1978, Congress amended the 1948

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Integration Act to allow women to serve on additional types of noncombat ships. The Navy and the Marine Corps subsequently assigned women to noncombat ships such as tenders, repair ships, and salvage and rescue ships.

In February 1988, DOD adopted a Department-wide policy called the Risk Rule, that set a single standard for evaluating positions and units from which the military service could exclude women. The rule excluded women from noncombat units or missions if the risks of exposure to direct combat, hostile fire, or capture were equal to or greater than the risk in the combat units they supported. Each service used its own mission requirements and the Risk Rule to evaluate whether a noncombat position should be open or closed to women.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993 repealed the prohibition on the assignment of women to combat aircraft in the Air Force, the Navy, and the Marines Corps.<sup>1</sup> The act also established the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces to study the legal, military, and societal implications of amending the exclusionary laws. The Commission's November 1992 report recommended retaining the direct ground combat exclusion for women.

In April 1993, the Secretary of Defense directed the services to open more specialties and assignments to women, including those in combat aircraft and on as many noncombatant ships as possible under current law. The Army and the Marine Corps were directed to study the possibility of opening more assignments to women, but direct ground combat positions were to remain closed. The Secretary of Defense also established the Implementation Committee, with representatives from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the military services, and the Joint Chiefs, to review the appropriateness of the Risk Rule. In November 1993, Congress repealed the naval combat ship exclusions and required DOD to notify Congress prior to opening additional combat positions to women.<sup>2</sup>

In January 1994, the Secretary of Defense, in response to advice from the Implementation Committee, rescinded the Risk Rule. In DOD's view, the rule was no longer appropriate based on experiences during Operation Desert Storm, where everyone in the theater of operation was at risk. The Secretary also established a new DOD-wide direct ground combat assignment rule that allows all servicemembers to be assigned to all

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<sup>1</sup>National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993 (P.L. 102-190, Dec. 5, 1991).

<sup>2</sup>National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1994 (P.L. 103-160, Nov. 30, 1993).

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positions for which they qualify, but excludes women from assignments to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is direct ground combat.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this change was to expand opportunities for women in the services. Additionally, the Secretary stipulated that no units or positions previously open to women would be closed. At that time, the Secretary issued a definition of direct ground combat to ensure a consistent application of the policy excluding women from direct ground combat units. As of September 1998, DOD had not revised its 1994 rule or changed its direct ground combat definition.

In addition to establishing the direct ground combat assignment rule in 1994, the Secretary of Defense also permitted the services to close positions to women if (1) the units and positions are required to physically collocate and remain with direct ground combat units, (2) the service Secretary attests that the cost of providing appropriate living arrangements for women is prohibitive, (3) the units are engaged in special operations forces' missions or long-range reconnaissance, or (4) job related physical requirements would exclude the vast majority of women. The military services may propose additional exceptions, with justification to the Secretary of Defense.

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## Results in Brief

Approximately 221,000 of DOD's 1.4 million positions are closed to women, who comprise about 14 percent of the armed services. About 101,700 (46 percent) of these positions are closed based on DOD's policy of not assigning women to occupations that require engagement in direct ground combat. The remaining 119,300 positions are closed because they are collocated and operate with direct ground combat units, are located on certain ships where the cost of providing appropriate living arrangements for women is considered prohibitive, or are in units that conduct special operations and long-range reconnaissance missions. We found no positions closed to women because of job-related physical requirements.

DOD's current rationale for excluding women from direct ground combat units or occupations is similar to its rationale when it first formalized the combat exclusion policy in 1994. At that time, DOD officials did not consider changing its long-standing policy because they believed that the integration of women into direct ground combat units lacked both congressional and public support. Furthermore, transcripts of a 1994 press

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<sup>3</sup>Brigades are ground combat units of about 3,000 to 5,000 soldiers whose primary mission is to close with and destroy enemy forces. They are comprised of battalions and form part of a division or corps. Although many positions in the armed services have secondary tasks related to direct ground combat, the combat rule focuses on the primary mission of the unit, according to DOD officials.

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briefing indicate that DOD officials believed that the assignment of women to direct ground combat units “would not contribute to the readiness and effectiveness of those units” because of physical strength, stamina, and privacy issues. At the time of our review, DOD had no plans to reconsider the ground combat exclusion because in its view, (1) there is no military need for women in ground combat positions because an adequate number of men are available, (2) the idea of women in direct ground combat continues to lack congressional and public support, and (3) most servicewomen do not support the involuntary assignment of women to direct ground combat units.

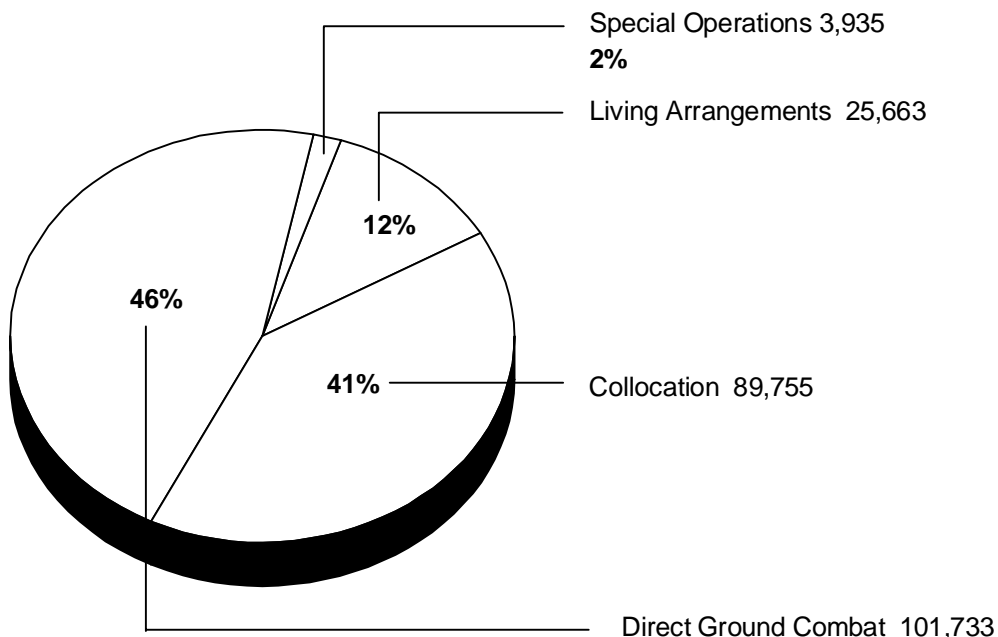
DOD’s definition of direct ground combat includes a statement that ground combat forces are “well forward on the battlefield.” This statement, however, does not reflect the less predictable nature of emerging post-Cold War military operations that may not have a well-defined forward area on the battlefield. If this trend continues, DOD’s definition of direct ground combat may become increasingly less descriptive of actual battlefield conditions.

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## Numbers and Types of Assignments Currently Closed to Women

At the time of our review, about 221,000 positions, or about 15 percent of the approximately 1.4 million positions in DOD, were closed to servicewomen. About half of these are closed because of DOD’s policy to exclude women from positions whose primary mission is to engage in direct ground combat. Figure 1 shows the percentage and numbers of positions closed based on exclusion policies. Appendixes I and II provide more details on the numbers and types of positions closed by each service.

**Figure 1: Positions Closed to Women Based on Exclusion Policies**



Note: Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force data.

As figure 1 shows, about 46 percent of the positions closed to women in the military services are associated with the direct ground combat exclusion policy. These positions, according to DOD officials, are in units whose primary mission is to engage in direct ground combat and includes occupations in infantry, armor, field artillery, and special forces. The majority of these closures are in the Army, followed by the Marine Corps, and a small number in the Air Force.

About 41 percent of the positions closed to women are attributed to the collocation exclusion policy. Units that collocate with direct ground combat units operate within and as part of those units during combat operations. For example, Army ground surveillance radar units, while not considered direct ground combat units, routinely operate with infantry

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and armor units on the battlefield. Because of the differences in roles, missions, and organization between the Army and the Marine Corps, however, some positions that are closed for collocation reasons in the Army may be closed for direct ground combat reasons in the Marine Corps, according to DOD officials.

Cost-prohibitive living arrangements account for about 12 percent of the positions closed to women. These positions are exclusive to the Navy and are on submarines and small surface vessels like mine sweepers, mine hunters, and coastal patrol ships.

The special operations forces and long-range reconnaissance missions exclusion policy accounts for almost 2 percent of all positions closed to women. These closures are in the Navy and the Air Force because the Army classifies most of its special operations forces as direct ground combat forces. During our review we found no additional exceptions or exclusions based on physical requirements.

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## DOD's Current Rationale for Excluding Women From Direct Ground Combat

When DOD formalized its policy excluding women from direct ground combat positions in 1994, it adopted the primary elements of the Army's ground combat exclusion policy as the DOD-wide assignment rule. According to DOD officials from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, the prohibition on direct ground combat was a long-standing Army policy, and for that reason, no consideration was given to repealing it when DOD adopted the current assignment policy in 1994.

Other reasons for continuing the ground combat exclusion policy were presented in a 1994 DOD news briefing announcing the opening of 80,000 new positions to servicewomen. At the briefing, defense officials said they believed that "integrating women into ground combat units would not contribute to the readiness and effectiveness of those units" due to the nature of direct ground combat and the way individuals need to perform under those conditions. The DOD official providing the briefing said that physical strength and stamina, living conditions, and lack of public support for women in ground combat were some of the issues considered. According to DOD, its perception of the lack of public support was partly based on the results of a survey done in 1992 for the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces. DOD documents also cited the Department's lack of experience with women in direct ground combat and its observation of the experience of other



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countries as part of the rationale for continuing the exclusion of women from direct ground combat.

As of September 1998, DOD had no plans to reconsider the ground combat exclusion policy because, in its view, there is no military need for women in ground combat positions because an adequate number of men are available. Additionally, DOD continues to believe that opening direct ground combat units to women lacks congressional and public support. Finally, DOD cited military women's lack of support for involuntary assignments to ground combat positions as another reason for continuing its exclusion policy. This lack of support has been documented in several studies of military women. For example, in a 1997 Rand Corporation study, done at the request of DOD, most servicewomen expressed the view that while ground combat positions should be opened to women, such positions should be voluntarily assigned.<sup>4</sup>

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## Direct Ground Combat Definition May Not Account for Anticipated Changes in Military Operations

DOD provided the military services with a single definition of direct ground combat. The services use the definition to ensure a common application of the policy excluding women from direct ground combat units. To be considered a direct ground combat unit, the primary mission of the unit must include all the criteria of the direct ground combat definition. Specifically, DOD defines direct ground combat as engaging “an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force’s personnel.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition, DOD’s definition states that “direct ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, or shock effect.” According to ground combat experts, “locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, or shock effect” is an accurate description of the primary tasks associated with direct ground combat units and positions. However, DOD’s definition of direct ground combat links these tasks to a particular location on the battlefield—“well forward.” In making this link, the definition excludes battlefields that may lack a clearly defined forward area.

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<sup>4</sup>Margaret C. Harrell and Laura L. Miller, *New Opportunities for Military Women: Effect Upon Readiness, Cohesion, and Morale*, Rand National Defense Research Institute (Washington, D.C. 1997).

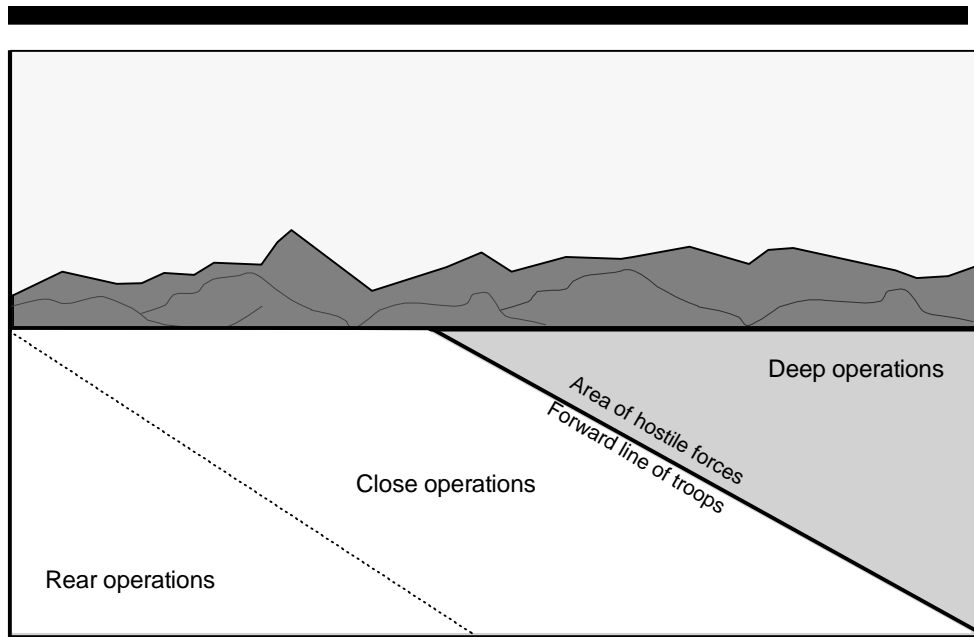
<sup>5</sup>Examples of individual weapons include handguns and rifles. Crew-served weapons require more than one person to operate and include such weapons as mortars and tanks.

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According to current Army and Marine Corps ground combat doctrine, battlefields are generally conceptualized to include close, deep, and rear operational areas. Close operations areas involve friendly forces that are in immediate contact with enemy forces and are usually exposed to the greatest risk. Direct ground combat units, along with supporting collocated units, primarily operate in the close operations area. Deep operations are focused beyond the line of friendly forces and are generally directed against hostile supporting forces and functions, such as command and control, and supplies. Rear operations sustain close and deep operations by providing logistics and other supporting functions. Several factors determine how the battlefield will develop during a military operation, including mission, available resources, terrain, and enemy forces.

The phrase “well forward on the battlefield” in DOD’s definition, according to ground combat experts, implies that military forces will be arrayed in a linear manner on the battlefield. On this battlefield, direct ground combat units operate in the close operational area where the forward line of troops comprises the main combat units of friendly and hostile forces. Land battles envisioned in Europe during the Cold War were planned in a linear manner. Figure 2 depicts an example of a linear battlefield.

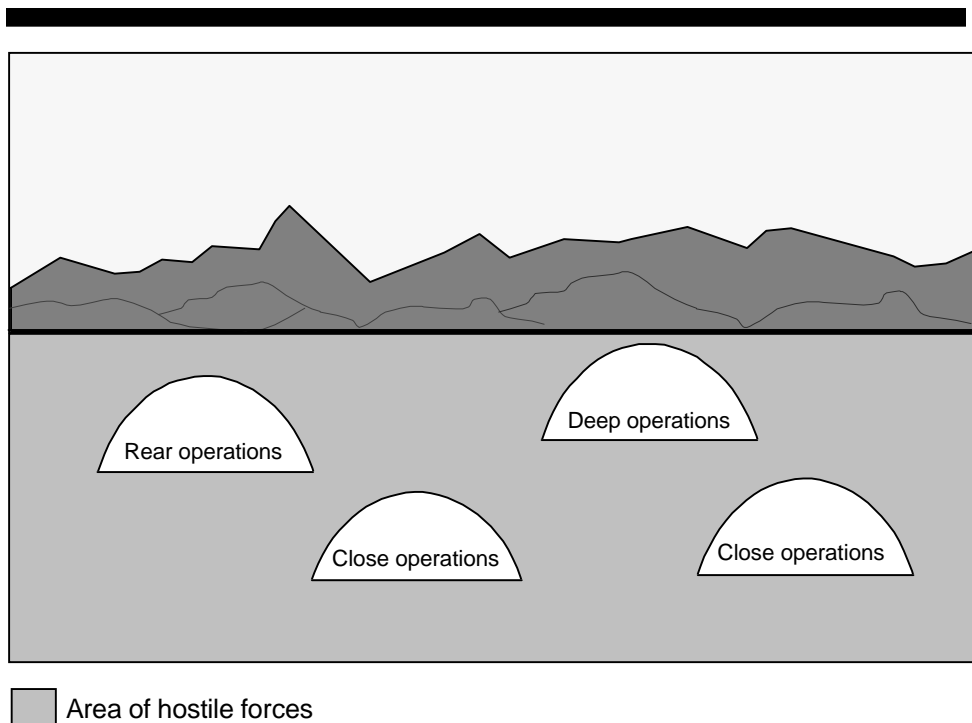
Figure 2: A Linear Battlefield



Source: Army information.

Battlefields can also be arrayed in a nonlinear manner, meaning that they may have a less precise structure, and the functions of close, deep, and rear operations may have no adjacent relationship. On a nonlinear battlefield, close operations can take place throughout the entire area of military operations, rather than just at the forward area as in the linear organization. Recent military operations like Operation Restore Hope in Somalia and Operation Joint Endeavor in Bosnia involved nonlinear situations that lacked well-defined forward areas, according to ground combat experts. Figure 3 depicts an example of a nonlinear battlefield.

Figure 3: A Nonlinear Battlefield



Source: Army information.

Ground combat experts in the Army and the Marine Corps note that, in the post-Cold War era, the nonlinear battlefield is becoming more common. Should this trend continue, defining direct ground combat as occurring “well forward on the battlefield” may become increasingly less descriptive of actual battlefield conditions.

## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Army, the Air Force, the Marine Corps, and the Navy. The Office of the Secretary of Defense and the military services orally concurred with information presented in the report. Additionally, the Army, the Navy, and the Marine Corps provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

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## Scope and Methodology

To identify the military occupations and positions closed to women, we reviewed data from the Army, the Marine Corps, the Navy, and the Air Force on current positions closed to women, the numbers associated with each closed position, and the justification for each closed position. Based on the information provided, we compiled the closed occupations and positions to determine the total number of positions closed and the justification for each. We discussed the currency of this information with officials from the Department of the Army, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel; Headquarters Marine Corps, Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower and Reserve Affairs; the Department of the Navy, Bureau of Naval Personnel; and the Department of the Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff, Personnel. During this review, we did not evaluate the military services' decisions for closing certain positions or units to women.

To identify DOD's rationale for the exclusion of women from direct ground combat positions, we reviewed documents, including policy memorandums, congressional correspondence, and press briefings from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. We also interviewed officials from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, who helped provide useful information regarding the historical origins of the prohibition of women in direct ground combat.

To determine the relationship of DOD's definition of direct ground combat to current military operations, we reviewed Army and Marine Corps ground combat doctrine. Doctrine is developed from a variety of sources, including actual lessons learned from combat operations, and it provides a framework for military forces to plan and execute military operations. We also interviewed ground combat doctrine officials at the Army's Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the Marine Corps' Combat Development Command, Quantico, Virginia, and an expert from the Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island.

We did not evaluate the rationale the military services used to classify closures based on the Secretary of Defense's approved justifications. To calculate the percentage of positions closed to women in the military services, we used the active duty authorized personnel end strength for fiscal year 1998. Authorized end strength is the maximum number of personnel authorized by Congress for a particular service. The Marine Corps, in some publications, may show a higher percentage of positions closed because it uses actual assignable positions to derive the percentage of positions closed to women. The actual strength, which is a

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measurement of personnel at a particular point in time, fluctuates throughout the year and can sometimes be lower than authorized personnel end strength.

We conducted our review from March to September 1998 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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We are sending copies of this report to interested congressional committees and Members of Congress; the Secretaries of Defense, the Army, the Air Force, and the Navy; the Commandant of the Marine Corps; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. We will also make copies available to other interested parties upon request.

Please contact me at (202) 512-5140 if you or your staff have any questions concerning this report. Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix III.

Sincerely yours,



Mark E. Gebicke  
Director, Military Operations  
and Capabilities Issues

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# Contents

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<b>Letter</b>		1
<b>Appendix I</b>		16
<b>Positions Closed to Women, by Service</b>	Army	16
	Marine Corps	17
	Navy	17
	Air Force	17
<b>Appendix II</b>		18
<b>Service Career Fields and Occupations Closed to Women</b>	Army	18
	Marine Corps	19
	Navy	19
	Air Force	20
<b>Appendix III</b>		21
<b>Major Contributors to This Report</b>		
<b>Table</b>	<b>Table I.1: DOD Exclusions and Number of Closed or Restricted Positions</b>	16
<b>Figures</b>	<b>Figure 1: Positions Closed to Women Based on Exclusion Policies</b>	5
	<b>Figure 2: A Linear Battlefield</b>	9
	<b>Figure 3: A Nonlinear Battlefield</b>	10

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## Abbreviations

DOD Department of Defense



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# Positions Closed to Women, by Service

About 15 percent of all positions across the armed forces are closed to women because they (1) are in occupations that primarily engage in direct ground combat, (2) collocate and operate with direct ground combat units, (3) are located on ships where the cost of providing appropriate living arrangements is considered prohibitive, or (4) are in units that engage in special operations missions and long-range reconnaissance. Table I.1 shows the number of positions closed in each service and the exclusion justification.

**Table I.1: DOD Exclusions and Number of Closed or Restricted Positions**

	Direct ground combat	Collocation with ground combat units	Living arrangements are cost prohibitive	Special operations and long-range reconnaissance	Total
Army	71,670	70,280	0	0	141,950
Marine Corps	28,469	14,991	0	0	43,460
Navy	0	4,187	25,663	3,516	33,366
Air Force	1,594	297	0	419	2,310
<b>Total</b>	<b>101,733</b>	<b>89,755</b>	<b>25,663</b>	<b>3,935</b>	<b>221,086</b>

Source: Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force data.

## Army

About 142,000 positions, or about 29 percent, of the Army’s fiscal year 1998 active force authorized personnel end strength of 495,000 are closed to women. About half of these closures are associated with occupations involving direct ground combat. These closures include the occupational fields of infantry, armor, and special forces. The remaining closures are in occupational specialties or units that are required to collocate and remain with direct ground combat units, including combat engineering, field artillery, and air defense artillery. Also, some occupational specialties in the petroleum and water, maintenance, and transportation career fields, for example, are considered open to women but are closed at certain unit levels because they collocate with direct ground combat units.

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## Marine Corps

About 43,400 positions, or about 25 percent, of the Marine Corps' fiscal year 1998 active force authorized personnel end strength of 174,000, are closed to women.<sup>1</sup> About two-thirds of the closures are in occupational fields involving direct ground combat, such as infantry, artillery and tank, and assault amphibious vehicles. The other third of the closures are in occupational specialties that are required to collocate and remain with direct ground combat units, such as counterintelligence specialists and low-altitude air defense gunners. In addition, some occupational specialties, such as landing support specialist and engineering officer, are generally open to women but are closed at certain unit levels because of collocation with direct ground combat units.

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## Navy

About 33,300 positions, or about 9 percent, of the Navy's fiscal year 1998 active force authorized personnel end strength of 390,802 are closed to women. About 77 percent of these closures are in positions on submarines and small surface vessels where the Navy considers modifications required for living arrangements to be cost prohibitive. About 13 percent are closed because they collocate with special operations forces or Marine Corps forces that engage in direct ground combat. Slightly more than 10 percent of the positions in the Navy are closed because they are in units that conduct special operations forces missions

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## Air Force

About 2,300 positions, or less than 1 percent, of the Air Force's fiscal year 1998 active force authorized personnel end strength of 371,577 are closed to women. About 69 percent of these are in occupations such as tactical air command and control, combat controller, and pararescue, which are involved with direct ground combat, according to Air Force documents. About 18 percent are closed because the Air Force places restrictions on assignments to aircrew positions in its helicopters that conduct special operations forces missions. About 13 percent of the closures are in certain weather and radio communications occupations because they collocate with ground combat units or special operations forces.

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<sup>1</sup>The Marine Corps shows over 30 percent of its positions closed to women in some publications because it does not use authorized active duty personnel end strength to derive the percentage of positions closed to women. According to Marine Corps officials, the Corps uses the number of actual assignable positions, which was about 141,300 in fiscal year 1998. The number of actual assignable positions closed to women does not include about 31,400 servicemembers classified as patients, prisoners, trainees, and transients who are counted against authorized end strength but are not actually assigned to specific positions.

# Service Career Fields and Occupations Closed to Women

Appendix II shows the career fields and occupations that are closed to women. Other occupations, for example in transportation, maintenance, and aviation, are generally considered open, but women may be restricted from assignment to them at various unit levels because these units collocate with direct ground combat forces.

## Army

### Closed Career Fields

Armor  
 Infantry  
 Special Forces

### Closed Occupational Specialties

Short Range Air Defense Artillery Officer  
 Forward Area Air Defense Systems Technician  
 Field Artillery Firefinder Radar Operator  
 Air Defense Command Control, Computers, Communication, and Intelligence Tactical  
 Operations Center Enhanced Operator/Maintainer  
 Bradley Linebacker Crewmember  
 Avenger Crewmember  
 Chaparral System Mechanic  
 Combat Engineer  
 Self-Propelled Field Artillery Turret Mechanic  
 M1 Abrams Tank Turret Mechanic  
 M60A1/A3 Tank Turret  
 Bradley Fighting Vehicle System Turret Mechanic  
 Self-Propelled Field Artillery System Mechanic  
 M1 Abrams Tank System Mechanic  
 M60A1/A3 Tank System Mechanic  
 Bradley Fighting Vehicle System Mechanic  
 Ground Surveillance Systems Operator

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**Appendix II  
Service Career Fields and Occupations  
Closed to Women**

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## Marine Corps

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### Closed Career Fields

Infantry  
Artillery  
Tank and Assault Amphibian Vehicle

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### Closed Military Occupational Specialties

Ground Intelligence Officer  
Counterintelligence Officer  
Counterintelligence Specialist  
Interrogation Specialist  
Ordnance Vehicle Maintenance Officer  
Towed Artillery Systems Technician  
Assault Amphibian Repairer/Technician  
Main Battle Tank Repairer/Technician  
Ordnance Vehicle Maintenance Chief  
Low Altitude Air Defense Gunner  
Forward Air Controller/Air Officer  
Low Altitude Anti-Air Warfare Officer  
Marine Corp Security Force Guard  
Marine Corp Security Force Close Quarter Battle Team Member

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## Navy

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### Closed Career Fields and Ratings

Special Warfare Officer  
Warrant Officer, Special Warfare  
Submarine Duty Officer  
Special Warfare Combatant Swimmers  
SEAL Candidate  
Special Warfare Combatant Craft Crewmember  
Special Operations Independent Duty Corpsman  
Special Operations Technician  
Submarine Force Independent Duty  
Aviation Boatswain's Mate Launch and Recovery Equipment  
Fire Control Technician  
Fire Control Technician, Ballistic Missile  
Fire Control Technician, Gun Fire Control  
Gunner's Mate, Guns

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**Appendix II  
Service Career Fields and Occupations  
Closed to Women**

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Gunner's Mate, Missile  
Missile Technician  
Sonar Technician, Surface  
Sonar Technician, Submarine

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**Ships Closed to Women**

Fleet Ballistic Missile Submarine  
Attack Submarine  
Mine Counter Measure  
Mine Hunter, Coastal  
Patrol Coastal

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**Air Force**

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**Closed Career Fields**

Combat Controller  
Pararescue  
Tactical Air Command & Control  
Combat Control

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