

DEPLOYING WOMEN TO DIRECT GROUND COMBAT: MISTAKING A LOAD-BEARING WALL FOR A GLASS CEILING

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For the last half-century, women in the United States have been breaking through so-called “glass ceilings”—actual or assumed barriers to our participation in a variety of educational and vocational fields. As a result, almost every imaginable option is now open for women to pursue, as their gifts and interests match those opportunities.

Still, women have not reached every last possibility. In evaluating remaining distinctions between women and men in society, it is important to determine whether they are, in fact, glass ceilings that can be broken like so many before—or if, in fact, they are actually more like load-bearing walls, anchored in something essential about how human beings are designed as individuals and relate in community.

The image of a glass ceiling suggests a feature that can be removed without changing a building’s basic structure. It is incidental to its structural coherence, and its arbitrariness may even be an argument for its removal.

Breaking a glass ceiling causes some cultural disruption, of course. Navigating the metaphoric “broken glass” may force everyone to be more self-aware and cautious for a while, but it

soon gets swept away and largely forgotten.

Tearing down a load-bearing wall, on the other hand, changes something fundamental about the inherent structure. Such demolition is a much more significant and costly proposition that cannot be undertaken in isolation. Inevitably, it changes the character of the structure as a whole.

Sending women into direct ground combat is tearing down a load-bearing wall. This particular wall is vital to the military mission, to realism about sex differences, and to protecting life. Along with these policy and social concerns, a Christian worldview adds theological considerations based on the nature and purpose of human beings made in the image of God, male and female. Taken together, it becomes clear this is a wall that should be defended, not destroyed.

MILITARY MISSION MUST BE THE PRIORITY

The military’s mission is to fight and win the nation’s wars. Accomplishing that combat mission must take priority over other social goals or individual ambition. Some argue that the goals of mission effectiveness and women’s participation in combat units are not mutually exclusive. Women most certainly can and do contribute mightily to the overall mission of the military.

The current debate revolves around the participation of women in *direct* ground combat units, however.¹ The evidence suggests that this is an area in which sex differences are relevant to mission effectiveness.

The most extensive evaluation undertaken by any of the military service branches while the Obama administration considered the women-in-combat

women *can* do as autonomous individuals, and it is not just about a female body's strength or a woman's aptitudes. From this perspective, the most significant issue is how to use those given capacities in relation to others for the pursuit of the purpose for which human beings were created.

More than nostalgia, then, should prompt reflection on the wartime division of labor, an arrangement that has historically charged able-bodied men with waging battle and tasked women with salvaging society through the ravages of war. This not only underscores that continuing to cultivate the fruits of peace is as urgent a priority as waging war to protect it. The respective roles of men and women in such exigencies give expression, for example, to the reality that God's justice includes both judgment and shalom.

CONCLUSION

Few of us alive today have experienced an all-out conflict that requires men and women together to accomplish such a great civilizational endeavor. And perhaps because of that it is difficult for us any longer to fathom a social mission that requires us to act in solidarity with our own sex in a way that complements the role of the opposite sex. This calls for much more theological reflection on particular implications of the complementarity of the sexes in pursuing the cultural mandate, and that reflection must extend beyond procreation to matters of ordering cultural life and governing.

Meanwhile, much more cultural reflection is needed on the question of sending women into direct ground combat. We would do well to recognize it threatens

a load-bearing wall of our civil society—and to stop the demolition of it before crisis exposes why we needed its support all along. P

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(Endnotes)

1 Based on an Army survey of women in active duty, reserves, and National Guard women, only about 7.5 percent of the 30,000 respondents seek such roles. Lolita C. Baldor, "Few Army Women Want Combat Jobs, Survey Shows," *USAToday*, Feb. 25, 2014, usatoday.com.

2 When tested for anaerobic power, for example, the top 25 percent of females overlapped with the bottom 25 percent of males. In aerobic capacity, the female average was 10 percent lower than the male average. Hope Hodge Seck, "Mixed-gender Teams Come Up Short in Marines' Infantry Experiment," *Marine Corps Times*, September 10, 2015, marinecorpstimes.com (accessed May 3, 2016).

3 Joseph J. Knapik, Marilyn A. Sharp, Michelle Canham-Chervak, Keith Hauret, John F. Patton, and Bruce H. Jones, "Risk Factors for Training-related Injuries Among Men and Women in Basic Combat Training," *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, Vol. 33, Issue 6 (June 2001), pp. 946–954, journals.lww.com (accessed May 3, 2016).

4 Lolita C. Baldor, "Officials: Marine Commandant Recommends Women Be Banned from Some Combat Jobs," *Marine Corps Times*, September 19, 2015, marinecorpstimes.com (accessed May 3, 2016).

5 Cheryl Pellerin, "Carter Opens All Military Occupations, Positions to Women," *DoD News*, December 3, 2015, defense.gov (accessed May 3, 2016).

6 Douglas Ernst, "Gen. Dempsey Hints: Bar Likely Lowered for Female Combat Units," *The Washington Times*, January 25, 2013, washingtontimes.com (accessed May 6, 2016).

7 Derrick Perkins, "Mabus: 1 in 4 Marine Recruits Should Be Women," *Marine Corps Times*, May 26, 2015, marinecorpstimes.com (accessed May 3, 2016).

8 Schaefer et al. *Implications of Integrating Women into the Marine Corps Infantry*, p. 58. See also Leo Shane III, "Questions, Frustrations as Women Prepare to Join Combat Units," *Military Times*, February 10, 2016, militarytimes.com (accessed May 3, 2016).

9 Sebastian Negrusa, Brighita Negrusa, and James Hosek, "Gone to War: Have Deployments Increased Divorces?" *Journal of Population Economics*, Vol. 27, Iss. 2 (April 2014), p. 495, rd.springer.com (accessed May 5, 2016).

10 Amy Bushatz, "Military Divorce Rate Hits Lowest Level in 10 Years," *Military.com*, February 25, 2015, military.com (accessed May 3, 2016). Researchers caution that military divorce statistics are not comparable to those in the general population because of differing methods of measuring.

11 A RAND Corporation study of post-9/11 deployment concluded, "Fourth, we find a larger effect of deployment on the divorce hazard of female service members. This suggests an asymmetry in the capability or willingness to adapt to deployment of couples where the service member is female in comparison with families where the service member is male." Sebastian Negrusa, Brighita Negrusa, and James Hosek, "Gone to War: Have Deployments Increased Divorces?" *Journal of Population Economics*, Vol. 27, Iss. 2 (April 2014), p. 495, rd.springer.com (accessed May 5, 2016). See also Benjamin R. Karney and Jon S. Crown, "Families Under Stress: An Assessment of Data, Theory, and Research on Marriage and Divorce in the Military," RAND Corporation, 2007, p. 91, rand.org (accessed May 5, 2016).

12 Amy Bushatz, "Female Military Divorce Rates Continue Decline," *Military.com*, December 18, 2013, military.com (accessed May 3, 2016).

13 Thomas S. Szayna, Eric V. Larson, Angela O'Mahony, Sean Robson, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Miriam Matthews, J. Michael Polich, Lynsay Ayer, Derek Eaton, William Marcellino, Lisa Miyashiro, Marek Posard, James Syme, Zev Winkelman, Cameron Wright, Megan Zander Cotugno, and William Welsler IV, *Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), p. 180, rand.org (accessed May 3, 2016).

14 Jude Eden, "No, Women Should Not Be Included in the Draft," *The Daily Signal*, February 16, 2016, dailysignal.com (accessed May 3, 2016).

15 *Rostker v. Goldberg*, 453 U.S. 57 (1981), caselaw.findlaw.com (accessed May 3, 2016).

16 Herman Bavinck, *The Origin, Essence, and Purpose of Man*, Fig Classic Series, 2012.

policy change was a Marine Corps study of mixed male and female units in combat training activities over a period of nine months. The Marine Corps' Ground Combat Element Integrated Task Force Assessment evaluated teams on 134 ground combat tasks. All-male units outperformed units made up of women and men in 69 percent of these tasks. Mixed units did better than male units in just two tasks. The study showed significant disparity in results for females and males, with *top*-performing females reaching the level of *low*-performing males.²

Beyond initial qualification, women must maintain a very high level of performance over time to participate effectively in combat units. Yet in the Marine combat integration test, female training course completion rates lagged well behind men. In an evaluation of Army Basic Combat Training, women had an injury rate twice that of the men.³

Disregarding the recommendation of the commandant of the Marine Corps on the basis of such results,⁴ Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced in December 2015 that all military specialties would be open to women.⁵ These and other statements contribute to the conclusion that social goals, not military effectiveness, are taking precedence in the decision to drop women's exemption from ground combat.

In 2013, for example, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey said at a Pentagon press conference that if a woman cannot meet unit standards then military commanders would have to justify why the standards have to be so high.⁶ Similarly, in a May 2015 speech at the

Naval Academy, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus stipulated that one in four enlisted recruits in the Navy and Marine Corps should be women.⁷ Currently the Marine Corps is about seven percent female and the Navy 18 percent. Concerns about maintaining rigorous standards while pursuing these goals have been raised by many.⁸

REALISM ABOUT SEX DIFFERENCES

Sex differences are relevant to the accomplishment of the military combat mission not just with regard to individual capacity, but also with respect to unit cohesion and morale. Those exceptional few women who do qualify for combat occupational specialties enter units whose culture will change as a result of their participation. That may yield some positive results, but it also carries considerable challenges. In particular, placing women into combat units ignores the realities of human nature that emerge when men and women are in close quarters, in situations where privacy is not always feasible.

Norms like modesty, privacy, and safety are reflected in public and professional settings by sex-specific restrooms and locker rooms, for example. In combat and special operations, however, the physical proximity, intensity, and lack of privacy often dismantle those protections. That not only has the potential to create sexual tension for the men and women in such operations, but it also is likely to add considerable stress to service members' marital relationships, which already suffer serious strain during deployment.

For example, divorce rates among military personnel trended upward during the period of

post-9/11 deployment.⁹ In 2001 the military divorce rate was 2.6 percent, and by 2011 it had reached 3.7 percent. Thankfully, it has declined steadily since then, reaching 3.1 percent in 2014.¹⁰

For women in the military, the prospect of marital strain is already significant. Military women have much higher divorce rates than military men:¹¹ 7.2 percent among active-duty women compared to 2.9 percent among active-duty men in 2013.¹²

These factors form a backdrop to the concerns raised about the effects on family dynamics of the decision to make women eligible for assignment to all military units. This issue was reported as a significant concern in a 2015 survey of U.S. Special Operations Forces on integrating women in their ranks. In that survey, Navy SEALs made the following statements:

"It is a major concern for a lot of the wives...[I]t's bad enough that half of us have a better relationship with our platoon than our family...(E-9, SEAL)."

"The wives will definitely object. My wife knows how close we are here. She won't want a female entering that mix (E-7, SEAL)."

"I think my wife would probably have trouble with me shacking up in a tent with a woman for a week on a mountain. I've done dives in small confined spaces—it's not a job that men and women can do together (E-7, SEAL)."¹³

PROTECTING LIFE

It is one thing for women to be incidentally drawn into combat or for their service to be



She Shall be Called Woman by George Frederic Watts, circa 1880. Tate Britain, London. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

required in a national security emergency in the event of a shortage of able-bodied men. But to plan for women to participating in frontline direct ground combat is at odds with

the priority of protecting life. Greater risk of injury makes women more vulnerable in ground confrontations with the enemy. Women captured by the enemy could face the

potential of sex-based violence often associated with conflict. “Combat is not an equal opportunity for women because they don’t have an equal opportunity to survive,” says Jude Eden, who served in the Marine Corps but opposes putting women in direct ground combat.¹⁴

Pregnancy makes a woman more vulnerable in a combat situation and puts her unborn child at great risk. The potential for combat exposure to degrade women’s unique capacity to carry human life is at odds with the consideration of justice for the unborn non-combatant.

FROM MAY SERVE TO MUST SERVE?

The decision to eliminate women’s combat exemption has led some to suggest that women should be required to register for Selective Service, making them eligible to be called up in the event of a future draft. The discussion about whether a *few* exceptional women *may* participate in combat has quickly become a question of whether women *generally* can be *forced* into combat.

Women’s combat and draft eligibility were linked in a 1981 Supreme Court decision, *Rostker v. Goldberg*, which upheld the requirement that only men register for Selective Service. The Court deferred to Congress’ policy on registration because it was consistent with its specifications on combat eligibility. As Justice William Rehnquist, writing for the majority, stated, “Congress was certainly entitled, in the exercise of its constitutional powers to raise and regulate armies and navies, to focus on the question of military need rather than ‘equity.’”¹⁵

The Obama administration's abandonment of women's exemption from direct ground combat changes the facts that the Court would consider in the event of a future challenge. Moreover, some in Congress are even now seeking to change Selective Service registration in the context of 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The Senate version of NDAA included a provision requiring women to register for Selective Service, while the House version stripped that proposal. A conference committee is expected to resolve differences between the two versions in the fall of 2016.

Congress should stop the headlong rush in NDAA to register women for Selective Service. The Obama administration has unilaterally promoted its social agenda in the military without adequately addressing concerns about potential negative effect on readiness and combat effectiveness. The next president should restore mission priority by directing military leaders to revise the policy that has eliminated sex-based distinctions for all combat, which removes a longstanding limit on registering women for a potential draft.

SOCIETY AT LARGE

To suggest that sending women into direct ground combat roles is like dismantling a load-bearing wall has implications in two dimensions. First, assigning women to ground combat units will fundamentally change the military by introducing variables that risk detracting from combat effectiveness as discussed above.

Second, such a shift in the military will have much further-reaching consequences for society as a whole. A number of points could be made about

this. To begin with, introducing women into direct ground combat and registering women for the draft are very significant social changes about which we have had very little reflection and debate as a society. Even congressional deliberation on the issues has been sparse. The changes have resulted largely from the unilateral action of the Obama administration. What implications would drafting women have on mothers, families, and society at large? Would women with religious convictions about their roles in society and the responsibility of men to protect have the freedom to conscientiously object, without a claim to pacifism? Americans—including policymakers—have had hardly any opportunity to consider the ramifications, even as a proposal to register women for Selective Service hangs in the balance in Congress.

Moreover, eliminating women's combat exemption and suggesting that men and women are interchangeable for all military occupations reinforces a false understanding of equality and blurs distinctions between the sexes. Men and women are not interchangeable in every context, and it does not advance women to suggest otherwise. Celebrating diversity means making distinctions between male and female where they are relevant, not simulating sameness. That matters both for women—and men—in the military, as well as for society at large.

IMAGE OF GOD

A Christian theological perspective suggests a wider vantage point on this issue that encompasses the nature and purpose of human beings made in the image of God, male and female. Dutch theologian Herman

Bavinck explains the implications of these realities revealed in Genesis 1:

It is not man alone, nor woman exclusively, but both of them, and those two in interdependence, who are bearers of the image of God. And, according to the blessing that is pronounced upon them in verse 28, they are such image bearers not in and for themselves alone.¹⁶

Genesis 1:28, often called the cultural mandate, is God's first instruction to humanity, to both fill and govern the earth. Bavinck's observation that male and female together give expression to the image of God and that this is closely related to their cultural task strongly suggests they can only succeed at this endeavor interdependently.

In Christian theology, responding to God's call to that cultural task is imperative for human beings seeking to honor God. Incorporating Bavinck's observation above, honoring God means honoring him as his image. From this perspective, if sexual difference is part of humanity's imaging of God, then recognizing and respecting sexual differences is essential to honor God. This conclusion has implications both for individuals inhabiting sexually differentiated bodies, and for males and females relating in community.

To strive for interchangeability fails to reflect the fullness of the image of God. Similarly, to set up typically male achievements as markers of female success risks denigrating aspects of God's image that he has revealed in the nature of females.

The question is not merely what