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WOMEN WARRIORS 2024

Resilience and the Woman Warfighter

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INTRODUCTION

Women in the military are integral to the success of U.S. defense, but their numbers are slow to grow. Across the joint services, a significant recruitment and retention crisis persists. Military services, with the exception of the Marine Corps, are tens of thousands below their combat-capable force structure.^{1,2}

And despite percentage increases in both the active/reserve side and officer/enlisted side, women only make up approximately **17%** of the entire active force. An even smaller number makes up leadership roles in the military’s hierarchical structure³. This represents a significant gender disparity, considering half the U.S. population is made up of women.

By increasing representation within the military, the Department of Defense (DOD) can diversify military leadership, promoting diversity in expertise and organic mentorship across the rank structure. Enlisting women to lead in the U.S. military could arguably address the recruitment and retention crises the joint services are currently experiencing.

Overall, careful consideration must be given to updating archaic training and operational mission policies, doctrine, and procedures that currently limit women’s training and operational opportunities to thrive and perform. Women bring a unique perspective and set of skills, both physically and mentally.

Research indicates a strong correlation between organizational success and gender equity, both in civilian and military capacities. However, the military is grossly underrepresented in comparison to the civilian sector. In the corporate world, companies that prioritize a variety of experiences, perspectives, and leadership styles demonstrate a higher level of organizational health, outperforming companies with homogenous leadership teams.⁴ By promoting equality and inclusivity, companies can benefit from a wider talent pool and improve employee retention and recruitment.

The DOD can follow the commercial world’s lead. Increasing gender representation across the joint services and at every level of leadership will bolster the likelihood of strategic and operational success in maintaining U.S. superiority. Through intentionally designing and cultivating training environments that are geared toward targeting the unique strengths and differences of women warfighters, the services can diversify their pool of recruits and build a strong team, built to serve.⁵



Women in the Military: Past, Present, Future

Since 1914, women have played an integral role in the success of the U.S. military. Over 350,000 women served in the U.S. armed forces that year, despite being deemed unqualified for most official positions. After years of dedicated service, it wasn’t until 1948, when President Truman signed the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act into law, that women were finally allowed to serve in a fuller capacity.⁶

As the nation’s military evolved, its new structure expanded opportunities for women warfighters. Starting in 2013, then-Defense Secretary Leo Panetta lifted the ban on women serving in combat roles and authorized them to serve in direct ground combat.^{7,8} As a result, women played a vital part in the success of combat initiatives like Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

Despite these advancements, the reality of women serving in combat roles is grossly deficient across the DOD. Initiatives such as Team Lioness supported the growth of Female Engagement Teams (FET) and Cultural Support Teams (CST)—initiatives that leveraged the unique skills of women warfighters in ground combat and special forces teams.⁹

The FET initiative for the Army and Marines, as well as the CST program for U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), embedded women warfighters in combat operations units in Iraq and Afghanistan. These warfighters gathered intelligence, built relationships, and interacted with local women and children, while observing cultural sensitivities about contact between male warfighters and the local population.

Candidates for these roles were held to the same physical standards as the male warfighter counterparts they supported—in many cases, with the military’s most elite teams. Although on paper, structures like the FETs and the CSTs were not meant to be a blueprint or pipeline for integrating women into combat arms, these initiatives did in fact pave the way in highlighting the critical role women warfighters play inside and outside the wire, in combat and noncombat roles.

“I supported a joint task force and conducted direct action missions alongside 75th Ranger Regiment. This meant I was actually loading up on a bird and going on night raids, before women were allowed to serve in combat arms. While on target, I focused on women and children. Evident in the death of Ashley White, killed in action in 2011, and Jenny Moreno, killed in action in 2013, we were exposed to the same risks as our male counterparts, and had to be prepared for anything.”

—Jessica Yahn
CST 2013; Founder, AllTru



Headwinds for Female Warfighter Success

Historically, women in the military have served with honor, bravery, and sacrifice with little to any recognition. Over the years, their silent work produced groundbreaking policies such as the Women, Peace and Security Act (WPS) of 2017—which recognizes that women are on the front lines of international security challenges as powerful agents of change to create stability and peace.¹⁰

In 2020, the DOD noted that “recruiting and retaining women service members is important in order to more accurately reflect the nation’s population, ensure the strongest possible military leadership, and maintain and improve mission readiness.”¹¹ A RAND report released in 2023, on the fifth anniversary of the WPS Act, affirmed the need for a gender-balanced military, both to cooperate with allies and meet the needs of civilians in combat zones.¹²

By better understanding the “day in the life experiences” of women warfighters in tactical environments, the DOD will be able to derive recommendations on how U.S. forces can better retain women in service. According to a 2020 Government Accounting Office (GAO) report, there are six main factors influencing women active-duty service members’ decisions to separate from the military: work schedules, deployments, family planning, dependent care, sexual assault, and organizational culture.¹¹ One might argue male service members are exposed to the same factors, yet they are not separating at the same rate. To understand this departure rationale, we need to dive into the role that sexism, gender bias, and gender discrimination play.

“There continues to be only nominal gender diversity in the military, especially in the highest echelons of departmental leadership, and more female service members leave the military at various career points than their male counterparts.”

—Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services 2017 ¹⁴

Perception of Physical Ability

The U.S. military employs a hierarchical leadership and culture model, a top-down approach. While the DOD has achieved great success with this model, in mainstream society this has long been deemed an outdated approach to organizational structure and leadership.

Sameness, conventionality, and conformity are cornerstones of military culture. This attitude, coupled with a lack of gender balance, is where the friction lies for many women service members. Based on the experiences of the women service members interviewed in the GAO report, one could conclude that the existing organizational culture is a key factor influencing women warfighters’ decision to separate from service.¹¹

Study participants referred to the organizational structure as an “old boy’s network,” often feeling that they were not trained, treated, or recognized equally, and that they had to work harder to prove themselves in comparison to their male counterparts.

In 2018, as part of an independent study, Captain Elizabeth M. Trobaugh, U.S. Army Reserve, created an online survey evaluating where gender biases may prevent women from succeeding in the Army. She concluded that gender bias continues to cloud the discussion around testing standards for women warfighters. The article states, “Women were viewed by respondents as weaker either because their institutional standards are so much lower or because they perceive women to be physically weaker.”

In the Army, women soldiers between **17** and **21** are required to do **19** pushups, while male soldiers of the same age are asked to do **42** pushups. “Since the Army policy requires women to do only fewer than half the pushups males are required to do, the message conveys that women are half

as capable as men.”¹⁵ Physical testing standards can change, but if attitudes toward the physical ability of women stays the same, it continues to present an environment where the opportunity for advancement of women warfighters is inequitable.

The report paints a lose-lose situation for women warfighters: Women pass but at a “lower standard” and are perceived as receiving special treatment; or women do not pass because they are held to a much higher standard to prove capability beyond male standards.¹⁵ The Army and Congressional leadership have been at the forefront of a debate around the desire to measure warfighters with gender-neutral standards that accurately reflect the operational demands, while also not positioning standards that put any subgroup (such as age or gender) at a disadvantage.¹⁶

Work-Life Balance, Maternity Policy, and Family Dynamics

Captain Anna Zamora, Brigade Assistant S3, comes from a military family and has dedicated her career to the armed forces. She has also worked at D1 Training as a strength and conditioning coach. Throughout her career, she has observed many of her women colleagues struggling to decide when to start a family. They are concerned that pregnancy may mean postponed career timelines and missed advancement opportunities. She acknowledges that the Army has made tremendous strides in maternity policy and time away, but the career planning still falls primarily on the women service members. This is an example of gender discrimination at a cultural and policy level.

These challenges are mirrored outside the military: **69%** of women feel pressured by society to put

family before career, while **72%** report feeling conflicted when trying to balance work and family life. In



addition, **61%** believe maternity leave and childcare hinders their opportunity for career growth,

while an alarming less than **20%** feel confident returning to work after maternity leave.⁵

After returning to duty, traditional gender stereotypes can help explain why work and deployment schedules are perceived barriers for women service members and factors contributing to their separation. Dependent care is often handled by women. Women service members participating in the GAO report stated that daycare services on base did not have schedules conducive to their work schedule, making it challenging for them to simultaneously succeed personally and professionally.¹¹ A workplace culture that is “inflexible toward a work-life balance” can contribute to women feeling “unable to continue their personal obligations alongside their work obligations.”¹⁷

The Unseen Additional Cognitive Load

The tactical warrior, regardless of gender, is expected to endure challenging circumstances, as it is the very nature and expectation of the mission. However, day-to-day, women warfighters are far more likely to encounter situations that put them in a position to appear unprepared as compared to their male counterparts.

Due to operating in an environment primarily designed with the male body in mind, for example, factors such as ill-fitting equipment and lack of accessibility to facilities that are gender-neutral impact a woman warfighter’s ability to perform her job. Arguably, this leads to additional cognitive load and emotional stressors that male counterparts do not have to navigate.

Awareness of these challenges (and coming up with innovative and effective solutions) is not solely the responsibility of women warfighters. It requires a partnership across genders, as male warfighters serve alongside women and their awareness of these concerns will help strengthen performance across the unit. Through building a common understanding and appreciation for differences, male warfighters can become allies who support and include women warfighters as integral parts of the team.

“For any tactical warfighter who’s expected to do hard things, resiliency is inherent as you experience challenge and build the performance skills to operate in environments of consequence. This is the same regardless of gender. However, the additional burden for women is that there are going to be extra challenges that maybe the men don’t have to necessarily navigate. Males don’t have to deal with menstrual cycles while in a deployed location or they don’t necessarily have to deal with equipment not fitting appropriately while performing combat duties. While both men and women might have to deal with being a parent while in a combat zone, there’s something unique about being a new mother who recently gave birth to a baby, was nursing, and then is sent TDY or on a deployment. There’s definitely uniqueness associated with a tactical woman warfighter that introduces additional considerations to the already hard and challenging things we’re asking our military members to do.”

—Jannell MacAulay
Retired U.S. Air Force (USAF) Lieutenant Colonel; Combat Veteran, Former Pilot, and Cofounder of Warrior’s Edge Mindset Training

Resilience

Biased perceptions on physical ability, failure to support family planning, and additional cognitive burden due to operating in an organizational structure tailored for males are all contributing factors that may dissuade women warfighters from continuing their career. These factors can also affect their overall performance and success, hampering the development of diverse leadership. Despite these challenges, many women warfighters are still able to succeed. This can be attributed to resilience.

Resilience and other associated mental skills are considered crucial parts of military doctrine across branches. The ability to endure, overcome, or “bounce forward” is a key component of warfighter readiness and adaptability. Put another way: “Resilience is looking forward and through the fog to a clearer picture of the future,” states Lindsay Blaine, lead scientist and cognitive subject matter expert for Booz Allen’s Army business.

Resiliency is a trait that defines an ideal warfighter across all branches of service.¹⁸ The basic training experience for new warfighters is designed to not only build physical skills but also develop toughness and mental robustness through exposure to stressors. Resiliency is an undercurrent in most training evolutions and a baseline requirement to succeed across the services.¹⁹

For the Navy and the Marines, the focus of resilience is tied to realistic and challenging training exercises that encourage personal development and group cohesion.^{20,21,22} Research has offered suggestions on ways to measurably build resilience in a more structured fashion within these approaches.²³ The Navy also empowers leaders with resilience teams to help identify and mitigate factors which may reduce resilience and crew readiness.²⁴

“When we lack the skills that make up resiliency, that messy overflow is likely not contained to the life domain where the stress originally came from. This can greatly impact the performance and retention of a warfighter. For example, a deployment extension or last-minute PCS [permanent change of station] can contribute to strain on relationships at home. A new baby in the family can contribute to a lack of focus in a course or special pipeline. An unexpected medical bill can contribute to feelings of frustration or helplessness, thus affecting one’s mental health. This is why a comprehensive and holistic understanding and approach to human performance is so important.”

—Ellen Healy-Miley

Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS), Tactical Strength and Conditioning Facilitator, Health and Human Performance Specialist, Navy Market, Booz Allen

It’s important to note that resilience skills are transferable between situations. Strategies to develop hardiness and grit can be applied in different situations; what’s specific is how it’s applied to the individual. Each of us will use different productive self-talk measures, set different paths to success, and reframe situations differently. It’s also important to note that a group of resilient people doesn’t necessarily result in a resilient team; there are specific steps to take to grow and mesh as a cohesive unit or team.

—Lindsay Blaine

Lead Scientist and Cognitive Expert, Army Market, Booz Allen

“The dictionary identifies resilience as the ability for an object to bounce back to its original form after being manipulated. I see resilience as not bouncing back but bouncing forward. Bouncing through our experiences. Because when you do something hard, which is where the need for resilience comes in, you should not be the same afterward, nor should you go back to a previous form. If you’ve done something challenging, you’ve grown from the experience—to a better and more resilient form of yourself.”

—Jannell MacAulay

Retired U.S. Air Force (USAF) Lieutenant Colonel; Combat Veteran, Former Pilot, and Cofounder of Warrior’s Edge Mindset Training

For the Air Force and Space Force, resilience is viewed as both a contributor and a benefactor across multiple domains of airman and guardian fitness.²⁶ In fact, the Air Force has recently made changes to the structure of its basic training curriculum to instill positive lifestyle habits, including the importance of good nutrition and proper exercise form, stress reduction, and sleep hygiene, earlier in the training phase.²⁷ The goal is to give trainees the tools to endure the challenges of basic training from the start, instead of having those lessons develop over the course of the cycle.²⁸

Changes in structure of basic training to promote trust and cohesion have also been implemented in the Army and, like the Air Force and USSOCOM, the Army views resilience as part of an all-encompassing approach to human performance that covers multiple domains. The Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) system incorporates mental resilience in its mental readiness domain.²⁹ Additionally, there is an Army Directorate on Prevention, Resilience and Readiness dedicated to providing resources for soldier support and training, including the Ready and Resilient (R2) strategy for building individual and group readiness.³⁰

With the focus on resilience across military branches, leaders need to ensure they incorporate other approaches to mental skills training, such as mindfulness. This will help prevent the downsides of resilience training such as burnout, loss of purpose, and harmful tolerance of adversity.³¹

“Resilience encompasses a person’s capacity to recover physically, mentally, and emotionally following a setback or adversity. Capacity can fluctuate based upon operational tempo, personal stressors, and other factors that have power over enhancing or debilitating one’s capacity to manage and get back in the fight. The ability to adapt and use one’s capacity to get back on track after an aversive situation is resilience. It’s the efficiency with which you return to “the arena” that defines resilience—regardless of the circumstances.”

—Maryrose Blank

Psy.D., Certified Mental Performance Consultant (CMPC), Cognitive Performance Specialist, BrightLabs Accelerated Readiness and Human Performance, Booz Allen



Women in Leadership: The Power of Mentorship

“I would definitely say [women mentors are] imperative. They are essential to the development of other female officers. And I think that finding that support system and network of women is crucial to helping other women grow in their careers.”

—Captain Anna Zamora

Brigade Assistant S3,
U.S. Army National Guard

What impact does having fewer women in leadership positions have on the up-and-coming woman warfighter? According to one study reviewed by the GAO, women active-duty, reserve, and Air National Guard officers in the Air Force mentioned the lack of women mentors and role models in leadership positions as a contributing factor for their decision to separate.¹¹

Is elevating more women to leadership positions the solution to increasing and maintaining representation in the U.S. military? In part. A sense of belonging and a feeling of being understood needs to accompany increased representation. Jen Schumacher, former assistant director of the Performance Psychology program at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, says it’s important to create a sense of inclusion and belonging through teaming efforts.

This includes team cohesion activities, creating spaces for people to bring their authentic selves to their work, communication around processes, discussions about differences, mentorship, and similar efforts.

During her time at West Point, she observed mentorship in action where experienced cadets were assigned as team leaders for incoming cadets. This formal mentorship program helped women transition from entry into a new environment to retention and continued service.

Women warfighters not only need to “see more” women in leadership positions, but they also need to feel aligned with them to learn and grow. Woman-to-woman mentorship is critical to help close the gender gap at all job levels.

Mentorship is critical in fostering the next generation of leaders. It is the very foundation of the passage of cultural, technical, and professional knowledge from one generation to the next. Mentorship, especially woman-to-woman, will positively impact the current lack of gender balance in the military

and ultimately alter the career experiences of the woman service member. Therefore, the DOD needs to raise awareness of the importance of mentoring to influence policy and planning.

The mentorship of women warfighters is not solely important for women leaders.³² Jessica Yahn described a positive experience as a CST member. During one of her first missions, her commanding officer, a sergeant major, insisted she share the team’s experience of suiting up for the mission. She had her own change room and was accustomed to getting mission-ready on her own, but the kit room was also where details of the mission were still being discussed.

Deliberately including her in mission preparations contributed to the success of the mission and cohesion of the team. This attitude of inclusion was critical to Jessica’s sense of belonging. Jessica’s experience demonstrates how a culture of connection, inclusiveness, team integrity, purpose, and psychological safety can exist within a hierarchical structure.

“He is one of the best inclusive leaders I’ve ever met and had the privilege to learn from in my Army career. The way he would put it is, I don’t care if you’re a guy, girl, blue, purple—all I care about is that you get on and off of that helicopter and do your job.”

—Jessica Yahn

CST 2013; Founder, AllTru

The Path Forward

“I don’t think females that are in a minority in a population expect the same access, but just want an awareness of how their experience is different and attempts to improve the differences that are observed.”

—Jen Schumacher

Mental Performance Consultant, Northwestern Football; Former Assistant Director of the Performance Psychology Program at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point

The issues of gender discrimination and unconscious gender bias are broad societal issues that will take time and effort for the DOD to fully recognize and address. As female representation continues to increase across the military ranks and military occupational skills, it will be easier to create a broader sense of belonging and a more inclusive esprit de corps. Increased representation and visibility will also make it easier for organic mentorship opportunities to develop, with both female and male leadership supporting the growth and advancement of younger female warfighters.

Yet now, while waiting for female representation to increase, the DOD needs more dedicated action and solutions to positively impact the recruitment, retention, and overall success of female warfighters.

The overall holistic approach to resilience—a robust mindset fueled by proper nutrition, healthy sleep habits, personal fitness, and spiritual connection—has been adopted across the services via initiatives such as the Army’s H2F program.

The Air Force’s approach to providing resilience training early in basic training, which reinforces habits and behaviors through lessons learned rather than trying to build resilience solely through repeated exposure to stressors, is one approach that should be closely monitored and possibly modeled across the branches.

In addition to resilience training, mindfulness training provides an opportunity to help address the unseen additional cognitive load that service members may experience in their military occupational specialties and leadership roles. Most resilience training is focused on counter arguments and “pushing through.” “Pain is weakness leaving the body” is a mentality shift the DOD must move away from.

Instead, leaders can focus on teaching military members to recognize a problem, work with it, and redirect when

appropriate. Building out additional mindset tools and skill sets could help negate feelings of lack of belonging or perceptions the system will never change. The Army has previously run pilot studies to incorporate mindfulness and yoga into Basic Combat Training.³³

Finally, a consistent and deliberate effort from senior leaders to listen to and strive to understand the needs of service members will also help bridge some of the challenges warfighters face. Senior leaders will benefit from a more holistic approach to human performance that allows them to gain visibility into the welfare and performance of service members across the military enterprise and act in proactive, rather than reactive, ways.

None of these approaches need to be targeted to female warfighters specifically, but continued focus and adoption of human performance methodologies will ultimately benefit all men and women who serve.

All of these approaches can benefit from the adoption of human performance technology and data analytics. The capture and analysis of key information, like sleep, activity, and internal biometrics aligned with stress, can be handled by wearable devices and other sensors. Similarly, the delivery and retention of training materials can be augmented through immersive and engaging experiences.

Adopting experience-based analytic approaches generates robust data that can inform warfighters about their unique capabilities. Additionally, this data enables human performance practitioners to establish baselines and predict outcomes for human performance and accelerated readiness goals. These insights can help scientists and military decision makers determine operational risk mitigation markers to ensure mission success.

Conclusion

From mission-critical roles like Cultural Support Teams (CST) to contributing to a multidomain future of cross-service information-sharing and responsiveness, increasing representation of females at all levels across the military services is the path for the future success of the U.S. military. To achieve this goal, leaders must take a proactive approach rather than hoping the cultural shift will occur on its own.

Dedicated effort is required to resolve female warfighters' longstanding challenges and ensure that female warfighters are given opportunities and tools to excel throughout their careers.

Leaders can begin with two practical initiatives: First, provide greater human performance education, programming, and mental resilience training for all warfighters; and second, leverage innovative experiences and analytics to help leaders better understand and address the challenges of the men and women who serve. By taking action today, the DOD can ultimately achieve a more robust and capable force.

“Resilience skills keep the warfighter ready, dependable, and sustainable over the course of the deployment and, moreover, across their career lifespan. This type of prioritization around non-negotiable health and human performance lifestyle factors produces a more well-rounded operator who not only is consistently a high performer on the battlefield, but also has a better quality of life outside of military operations.”

—Maryrose Blank

Psy.D., CMPC, Cognitive Performance Expert, BrightLabs Accelerated Readiness and Human Performance, Booz Allen

STATEMENT

This report focuses on cisgender female warfighters' experiences and the gaps in practice that create inequitable treatment compared to cisgender male warfighters. Sports Innovation Lab recognizes and affirms the spectrum of gender and sex; however, given the complex array of issues that make up the experience of any individual in the military, we have centered our research on cisgender female warfighters to untangle the specific issues this population faces. While some of the discussions in this report are highly relevant to anyone's embodied experience of military service, the unique experience of transgender female or male warfighters cannot be directly transferred to the experience of their cisgender counterparts, either cisgender female or male.

This report uses the term “warfighter” to represent all service members across the different branches of the U.S. military.

CONTRIBUTORS

This report is a product of the Tactical Athlete Leadership Board, a partnership between Booz Allen and Sports Innovation Lab. For more information about the Tactical Athlete Leadership Board, visit ta-lb.org.

Jenny Noiles, CSCS, a private-sector performance director, was a subject matter expert and writing contributor.

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