GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Steyrs and Sheilas: The Modern Role of Women in the Australian Army
Lance Corporal Hannah Evans

ABSTRACT

The role of women in the Australian Army has undergone enormous change since the 1980s, resulting in a significant increase in employment opportunities for women. This article describes the changing nature of female employment in the Australian Army and the Australian government policy reforms that have guided this change. It argues that the employment of women in the Army has been progressively shaped by strategic policy and the nature of both domestic and overseas operations and that the traditional definitions of combat-related duties and combat roles are redundant in this day of modern asymmetric warfare. Defence policy must therefore consider the nature of current operations, recognise that the tasks undertaken by women are complex, and acknowledge that policy should be driven by tactical requirements and what this article terms ‘value for policy’, rather than the pursuit of female equality and political correctness.
Introduction

Both servicemen and women make enormous personal sacrifices on a daily basis. However, the Australian public is exposed to very little of this information and much of the material in the mainstream media appears in response to accusations, incidents or investigations. Therefore it is not surprising that the media is highly critical of the working conditions of women in the Australian Army and their perceived lack of equality. In light of the recent investigations into sexual harassment and the announcement by Defence Minister Stephen Smith of the commencement of the full integration of women into combat roles and the ab initio recruiting into these roles planned for 2016, it is timely to examine the current role of women in the Army. Drawing on publicly released Defence sources, I will argue that combat duties are inherent in all categories of employment within the Army and that policymakers should develop and review Defence policy in recognition of the complex tactical and operational environments in which women are employed. In fact the current roles filled by women in the modern Army are no less dangerous than those of their male counterparts, particularly given the nature of asymmetric warfare and the hardships that often characterise humanitarian operations. The pursuit of equality should not be the basis for policy reform — particularly for Defence, an organisation that requires capability and performance to protect Australia’s strategic interests and deployed personnel.

Integration — pushing the boundaries for equality

Defence statistics from 1 June 2012 reveal that 307 Australian Defence Force (ADF) women were deployed overseas on operations — some 9% of the total deployed force — while females comprise approximately 10% of the permanent full-time Army.¹ These percentages have shown minimal growth (2%) since the 1990s, suggesting that both the Army and ADF have not increased in attractiveness as an employer of choice for women.² The revolution in women’s employment in the Army began in the mid-1980s with the disbanding of the Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC). The WRAAC was originally designed to replace men with enlisted women so that those men could be released in preparation for war. Reflecting the societal values of the time, the corps structure effectively segregated women from their male counterparts. The disbanding of the WRAAC reflected a change in Australian society and led to the integration of women into a number of previously male-only roles. It was accompanied by the removal of automatic discharge on pregnancy and equal working conditions.³
The Army was officially exempted from the provisions of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 allowing it to bar women from combat duties and combat roles.\(^4\)

Under the Act, combat roles are defined as ‘those requiring a person to commit, or participate directly in the commission of, an act of violence against an adversary in time of war.’\(^5\) Under Regulation 3 of the Act, combat-related duties are defined as ‘duties requiring a person to work in support of, and in close proximity to, a person performing combat duties, in circumstances in which the person may be killed or injured by an act of violence by an adversary.’\(^6\) Ironically, while the Sex Discrimination Act was designed to eliminate discrimination against females, the Army’s implementation of the Act saw women who were once employed in combat-related duties (for example in the Royal Australian Engineers and the Royal Australian Corps of Transport) unable to continue in these roles.

In May 1990, policy was amended to allow women to serve in some combat-related positions with a trial period of three years during which the combat-related duties exemption was removed. This opened up more career opportunities for women, raising the number of positions available for women in the Army to 55%.\(^7\)

That same year women were permitted to serve in combat-related positions in the Gulf War, as medics, nurses, logistics and supply operators, military police, intelligence analysts, drivers and movement operators. During this operation all personnel, regardless of rank or gender, were at risk of chemical or biological weapons attacks and potentially also targets for Scud missiles. Given the indiscriminate nature of the NBC (Nuclear, Biological and Chemical) threat, the training and protective standards that were applied throughout the operation were likewise universal and made no allowance for gender. As a result women worked in hazardous environmental conditions clad in NBC protective equipment. While women were not employed in direct combat roles, they were nonetheless in danger from indirect and direct fire. The nature of warfare (in this case asymmetric warfare) had blurred the geographical ‘front line’ and rendered the traditional definitions of combat roles and combat duties redundant.

In 1992 the combat exclusion policy was further relaxed and women were allowed to serve in all positions and units within Defence, albeit only in combat-related support roles. This change, along with increased measures to prevent sexual harassment and to improve treatment of women in the ADF, was driven by an increased awareness of prevalent sexual harassment and from mounting public pressure resulting from the HMAS Swan incident.\(^8\) There remained only front-line combat roles such as Special Forces, infantry, artillery, armoured and combat engineers from which women were excluded.\(^9\) Prior to this, male-only infantry
units would only employ male support staff (such as Operator Administration and Operator Supply). This policy change allowed women to 'post in' to these combat units for the first time. Women were also able to participate in training and deployments with those units and, although women were posted in support roles, if that unit was subsequently raised as a front-line combat unit, those women could then be exposed to direct contact with the enemy. Yet, in practical application, these exemptions and the Act itself proved irrelevant, particularly given the nature of modern asymmetric warfare in which direct engagement with the enemy is equally likely in both combat and combat support roles. This was certainly the case for Corporal Jacqui De Gelder, a female medic who was attached to an infantry section for an 'outside the wire' patrol in Afghanistan. She was chosen for the task because of her qualifications and was required to engage with the enemy when necessary. Her gender was never an issue in her ability to perform in a combat role.10

Debates over the inclusion of women in the Army’s combat units have emerged numerous times over the past two decades. In 1991 and then again in 1992, the Army created a Women’s Evaluation Team to examine the combat-related employment of females in response to pressure to allow women to serve in combat units.11 In 2000, the Australian government again reviewed the policy of combat exclusion and subsequently removed its reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), put in place under the Keating government (these reservations worked to support the exclusion of women from combat roles).12 However the National Interest Analysis, tabled in parliament on 7 April 2000, revealed that the Australian government was not yet ready to move away from combat exclusion.13 Although trials were held in which women could participate in combat duty initial employment training and in Special Forces selection programs so as to provide a basis for research, the issue of women in combat roles lay dormant until 2011. In September of that year, due to mounting public pressure and the gender issues highlighted by the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) Skype scandal, the Australian government re-reviewed the policy and subsequently removed the gender restrictions for combat employment categories. Like the HMAS Swan incident, the Australian media’s questioning of the Defence response to the ADFA Skype scandal led to a review into the treatment of women at ADFA14 and a separate review into the treatment of women in the ADF.15 These reviews led to a major reconsideration and redefinition of the role of women in Defence and indeed in the Army.
The recommendations of both reviews focused on the culture of Defence and the need to break down gender restrictions in order to remove a culture of inequality for women. Pragmatically, the reviews noted that the removal of gender restrictions would need to place the caveat of selection on the basis of job merit over gender, and indicated that this policy would improve overall ADF capability, although it did not specify how this would be achieved. A major issue that was not addressed was how Defence, and the Army in particular, would prevent gender-norming of the standards required for these combat roles as this could critically affect tactical capability. Gender-norming is the institutionalised practice of lowering extant standards or creating gender-centric standards. The United States military, for example, found that the implementation of gender-normed standards (under the ‘equivalent training’ system) increased the proportion of women within its forces. However, the institutionalising of gender-normed standards in critical training — which could negatively affect tactical capability — became the accepted norm. These standards included training in which female physical fitness is scored differently to that of their male counterparts and combat conditioning was changed to accommodate female strengths and weaknesses (for example discontinuing practices such as running with heavy weapons). There was also a regime of continuous re-testing or re-qualification of female candidates who had previously failed components of the requisite training. While gender-norming in the Australian Army would provide benefits such as an increase in diversity and female representation, it can have a long-term negative impact on tactical capability as combat-tested standards are not attained.

In June 2012, the government approved a five-year implementation plan for the employment of women in combat-related roles and, on 27 September 2012, the Defence Minister announced that all gender restrictions would be removed. Consequently, female staff cadets on graduation from RMC Duntroon are now able to elect combat duty postings including infantry officer, artillery officer, armoured officer and combat engineer officer. From January 2013, in-service transfers for currently serving non-commissioned officers and other ranks were also offered. Importantly, these transfers were often successful against non-gender-specific requirements such as the Physical Employment Standards Testing. The strategy of filling the combat ranks with women ‘from the top down’ is designed to help the transition for direct entry ‘off-the-street’ female recruits by 2016. The Australian Human Rights Commission’s Review into the Treatment of women in the Australian Defence Force: Phase 2 Report recommended that no fewer than two females per combat section (a section can consist of up to 12 people) should make a ‘critical mass’ to reduce the risk of sexual harassment and to provide a peer support
network within the section — yet this overlooks the critical questions often asked by commanders in the Army: will there be enough females willing to transfer or enlist in those roles to make up that critical mass?²⁰ And dismissing the notion of achieving gender equality, will those numbers and the change of policy bring about a significant tactical advantage on the ground and increase the effectiveness of ground operations? Considering the relatively small numbers of women within Defence, and the potential for even smaller numbers choosing combat roles, it is possible that most Army combat sections will not have women because of the ‘critical mass’ requirement.²¹ Allied to this is the question of whether the change will equate to ‘value for policy’ — in other words, will the level of funding allocated to developing and implementing this policy equate to a capability increase for the Army? For example, in Afghanistan, female Army members have used their gender as a cultural advantage and thereby increased force capability. Given the current fiscal climate, it is apt to note that changes to Army employment must consider how funds expenditure can be justified with increases to capability. The integration plan also runs the risk of further segregating those females by clustering them in targeted units or sections. While it is sensible to ensure that they have a female peer support network within their immediate workplace, the ‘critical mass’ requirement could possibly undermine the original intent of full integration.

**Deployments — adapting to the mission**

To fully understand the current role of women in the Australian Army, it is necessary to examine their operational employment and consider how gender has impacted on their roles. Since the first Gulf War, the roles filled by women, both on deployment and on exercise, have been diverse and often equally as dangerous as those of their male counterparts. In recent deployments women have worked in high threat areas performing tasks that are often outside their job description. A common attitude of ‘soldiers first’ and then job or trade second, has been a key training point for deployments and throughout initial employment training, again displacing the traditional definition of combat roles. A female driver, for example, could be transformed from a Heavy-Rigid Driver into a section member engaging with the enemy in order to fight through an ambush. This is the reality, and indeed the expectation, that the modern soldier and officer must prepare for regardless of corps or gender. The Australian Army has been in a state of constant deployment since the Gulf War and, as a result of the indiscriminate nature of modern asymmetric warfare, women have been constantly in the firing line. One consequence is that the role of women in the Army has become less defined by their trade, with women engaged in tasks such as patrolling, community engagement and security piquets, traditionally the domain of combat-related corps such as infantry.
Women have also taken part in strategic regional, humanitarian and stabilisation operations and these roles have been just as complex and varied according to the mission tasks and force requirements. The use of females to engage with the local populace in non-warlike operations highlights the issues surrounding the traditional definition of combat-related duties. How can this definition of ‘combat-related duties’ be applied to the roles filled by modern Army women who are working in battlespaces in which the threat is undefined and so is the nature of their duties and roles? In these operations the notion of gender has been challenged as, at times, men and women (irrespective of gender) have been required to perform tasks that are out-of-corps job roles (where they are working in areas not defined by their employed trade). In the Sinai (Operation Mazurka), Army members are posted to the Multinational Force and Observers. Women posted to this operation have performed both out-of-corps roles and also served in support of the headquarters element. Similarly, women have also been part of the ADF contribution to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (Operation Aslan) which oversees development work and nation-building in conflict-riven South Sudan. Throughout this operation, Army women have been involved in aviation and logistics support roles (such as drivers and petroleum operators), out-of-corps roles as military liaison officers and also in headquarters positions.

In the Asia-Pacific region Army women have also engaged in civil and military regional operations and exercises, often in support of the maintenance of peace and stability. In these operations women have been required to monitor and support the civilian population as part of civil military cooperation teams (CIMIC). On deployments such as Operation Bel Işı in Bougainville, Operation Anode in Solomon Islands and Operation Astute in East Timor, women have actively engaged in a range of support programs and been members of monitoring teams with an emphasis on cooperation with civilian government and non-government organisations. These teams perform a similar function to that of female engagement teams (FETs) in the Middle East and provide good examples of how deployed women have been tasked with traditionally unconventional roles. During these operations women have been members of the CIMIC teams, civilian monitoring teams, headquarters staff, police liaison teams and acted as interpreters. Likewise, throughout these operations and exercises, women have also filled more traditional roles including radio operators, drivers and logistics staff.

The ADF domestic operation, Operation Resolute, is one of Australia’s largest current operations and is designed to protect offshore maritime interests and enforce border security. The Transit Security Element (TSE) comprises both male
and female members of the Army and Navy. Like the FETs, the TSE offers a clear example of the use of gender to improve capability and constitutes a small but tactically vital component of Operation Resolute.27 As part of their duties, members of the TSE participate in boarding parties, securing and searching vessels and potential irregular immigrants as well as performing daily seafaring duties. A minimum of one female is assigned to each TSE section (so that the section can comply with the rules of engagement concerning same-gender searches); that female undertakes the same force preparation training and rostering as her male counterparts. Importantly, women have proven their ability to adapt to training subjects that traditionally belonged to male-only combat trades. Competencies such as ‘search techniques’, ‘apply basic defensive techniques’ and ‘apply the principles and techniques for controlling resistance’ comprise critical force preparation training for TSE members.28 Interestingly however, women did not need to belong to a combat corps to fill this role; like the FETs and female search teams (FSTS), once their rotation or tasking is complete they then return to their original employment category (and unit). Yet the TSE role also demonstrates the clever use of gender throughout an operation in the use of female TSE members to search female asylum seekers. The TSE also illustrates the varied nature of out-of-corps roles to which women have been exposed and their ability to complete the training required for these tasks while also successfully providing a tactical capability through use of their gender.29 In other respects, however, the TSE illustrates that gender is irrelevant to the role, with more attention paid to the individual’s ability to perform as a member of a highly skilled team.

In Afghanistan and Iraq (on Operation Falconer),30 deployed units require all members (regardless of gender) to perform their employed job roles, as well as adhere to security procedures relevant to the deployment. Clearly, regardless of gender or rank, all deployed members need to be aware of the threat of indirect fire (and NBC attacks) and be prepared to enter combat where necessary. As previously described, in Afghanistan, female Army members have used their gender as a cultural advantage and thereby increased force capability. Female members of coalition forces have operated in high risk areas in order to actively engage with the local female Afghan population as members of FSTS, FETs and female human intelligence exploitation teams (FHEt) accompanied by male security teams. Women who belong to FHETs and FETs are required to perform these tasks in addition to their normal duties.31 The use of these teams in engaging with the local Afghan female population has proven a significant boon to coalition forces in Afghanistan. This is illustrated by the work of the FETs who were operating within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and who
contributed to the Lines of Operations by collecting vital information used to map the atmospherics and effects of the battlespace and provide a basis for future operations. By engaging with and extracting information from the female half of the Afghan population, gender was effectively used as a means to increase tactical, operational and strategic capability and indeed provides considerable assistance to efforts in Afghanistan. Anecdotal evidence of the role of the FETs and the beneficial nature of their work suggests that:

_FETs enable bonds to be formed between ISAF females and the local female population, and already the successes are apparent. The FETs support education programs, economic development and the provision of health services to the local population and provide an opportunity for Afghan women to openly discuss their concerns and needs for improving their lives and those of their families with the female soldiers…_

While the FETs are non-combatant in nature, they have been required to operate in areas that pose a high risk of direct confrontation with the enemy. Even though officially women were previously ‘gender restricted’ in these warlike operations, all personnel were equally at risk, as the threats from IEDs (improved explosive devices), suicide bombers and indirect fire attacks blurred the geographical front line.

**The use of gender to increase capability**

The use of gender to provide tactical advantage also has implications for tactical and operational capability. Clearly, combat inclusion will increase capability through the use of women in traditional combat-related roles alongside their male counterparts and in unconventional roles such as those of the FET, FST and FHET. Since women are already providing this capability, however, their combat inclusion seems merely set to formalise their current work on a policy level. In addition, combat inclusion also suggests that the moral dilemma of putting women on the front line is no longer an issue and that society has faced its fear of mothers or sisters being killed in action or taken as prisoners of war. Ultimately, the role of women, prior to combat inclusion, has been adaptive, from the mission down to the task, in many of their roles, gender has been irrelevant. Nonetheless gender can be used to comply with the rules of engagement for an operation or to increase capability, as illustrated in Afghanistan.

Domestic operations provide further evidence that women increase tactical capability due to their gender and also illustrate the ability of women to serve in unrestricted gender roles. In the past, domestic operations have seen both males and females employed as members of search teams and in support of security teams.
In these operations, once again, gender is not an operational concern and both genders have successfully filled out-of-corps job roles; as such, the threat exposure has been the same for every individual. Some of the Australian Army’s key domestic contributions have included the Sydney Olympics (Operation Gold) and The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (Operation Guardian). During these operations both men and women were subject to complex yet risky security environments and could have faced terrorist threats, targeted threats from the Australian public and from criminal groups. As a result they had to be ready to adapt to the situation, which could change from low threat levels to high threat levels with little or no warning. Similarly, females perform the same work as their male counterparts (and face the same risks) in Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC) operations including recent responses to the Queensland Floods (2011), the Victorian Bushfires (2009) and Cyclone Yasi (2011). During these peacetime national support roles women join their male colleagues in providing emergency assistance to the local Australian communities, in rebuilding and participating in search teams. In addition to out-of-corps roles, women also contribute in conventional areas such as logistics, communication, medical and trades support. In these roles gender is irrelevant to the individual soldier’s proficiency and ability to complete his or her tasks successfully.

Support services and culture
For combat inclusion to be successful, women (and men) in the Army need to have adequate access to welfare and support services and a positive culture of inclusiveness. While a number of these services are available to women, the Review into the Treatment of Women in the ADF indicated that many women prefer to utilise informal peer support. Women also have ready access to formal support services which range from fairness and equity networks to housing support services including the Defence Community Organisation, chaplaincy support, the Defence Equity Organisation, the Defence Women’s Network and the rank hierarchy. The review revealed that, while most ADF members were happy within Defence, there were also many complaints that women were given preferential treatment and are treated more ‘fairly’ than their male counterparts (ranging from career promotions or more ready access to leave entitlements). The review also noted concerns that, if women served in certain roles, their presence might affect the capability of those employment categories, therefore reducing the overall performance and cohesion of the unit:
For many personnel there is also an enduring ambivalence about whether and where women ‘fit’, whether there should be more serving women, whether the presence of women affects capability and what roles they should perform. This is of concern ... 39

Cultural complaints such as these could potentially undermine the full integration of women into combat roles and these should not be dismissed lightly. Indeed, it must also be noted that cultural change will not happen quickly and that it may take generational change for cultural complaints such as this to disappear. The Canadian Army noted a breakdown in unit cohesion when it first initiated combat inclusion, but proved that, with effective and proactive leadership, the transition could be successful.40 While the ADF review was comprehensive, it failed to address the overriding issue that the Army is required to be an offensive and defensive force. Although diversity can impact positively on a tactical level, Defence support mechanisms should not be modelled on civilian ones and the introduction of equity and diversity policy is not a tactical consideration. So, for the strategic commander whose decisions are based on the battlespace and mission rather than the ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation of soldiers and officers, these mechanisms and policy have little tactical application. The review highlighted this conundrum, questioning the implications of female integration into combat roles for a mission-focused, tactically minded organisation:

The nature of the ADF’s war-fighting mission and emphasis on its ‘warrior culture’ perpetuates this belief, as has, until recently, the policy restriction on the employment of women in direct combat roles. The removal of this restriction means this formal policy barrier is gone, but the practical impact on women’s participation is less clear.41

Hence the five-year integration plan for females into combat roles will foster more equality for Army women, but will the tactical advantage for commanders be as significant as the costs to review and implement the reform? While this question cannot be definitively answered until the integration plan is completed in 2016, at the lowest level some of these costs will include modifying training establishments according to the service provisions necessary to accommodate women, and ensuring that employment training packages are developed to produce the same training outcomes for female soldiers. These packages will need to address the physical differences between male and female soldiers — which may result in the female soldiers reaching the training outcomes but over a prolonged period of time.42
However if the integration is successful the Australian Army has the potential to become a more egalitarian and diverse organisation which values women based on their ability rather than their gender. Defence will also need to invest in research and development of equipment that better suits the needs of a female combat soldier and in order to prevent unnecessary injuries and costly compensation claims. In terms of increasing capability, will unit manning and position allocation increase to accommodate these combat-qualified women? If not, then it is harder to measure an increased capability output. It is also apt to consider former Chief of Army Lieutenant General Peter Leahy’s argument on the significance of policy decisions for Defence:

*Right now our soldiers are at war. It might not be a war of national mobilisation but, nevertheless, we are defending our national interests and our young men and women are in mortal danger right now. There is a real live enemy out there trying to kill our soldiers. The decision we make about supporting current operations and shaping of the Army in the future are not esoteric decisions. They are real and vital and lives depend on our conclusions.*

Over the last two decades women in the Australian Army have experienced significant change in employment opportunity and equality of working conditions. With the ever-changing nature of Defence policy and the strategic concerns of the Australian government, there will no doubt be more opportunity for women to exhibit their ‘mettle’. But in today’s terms the Army has planned to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014 and the full integration of the first cohort of trained women into combat roles may not occur until late 2013, which may be too late for women to ‘earn their desert guernsey’. However, long-term changes to policy must consider the future implications of women serving in warlike operations. How will Australia respond when a female soldier is taken hostage? How will Defence compensate women with hip injuries who are unable to bear children due to long-term load-carrying stresses? If, for example, a female infantryman is killed overseas, will policy revert to its previous state? When Lance Corporal Jacinda Baker died in Afghanistan (the first female in the New Zealand Army to die since the Vietnam War), the New Zealand Prime Minister John Key publicly announced that he would not accelerate the removal of troops from Afghanistan nor would there be a re-evaluation of women in combat arms. But the question remains for the Army and the wider ADF — and it is one that cannot be dismissed — of how the Australian public and indeed the ADF will respond to a female death in combat. More importantly, will this prompt the Army to reintroduce a policy of gender
exclusion despite its discriminative nature? On an operational level, will the current integration policy endure if modern asymmetric warfare disappears to be replaced by a return to conventional warfare?

Conclusion

Dramatic changes in the nature of women’s employment in the Army over the past two decades have been driven by cultural and social change, public pressure and operational requirements — including changes in the nature of warfare itself. Women have finally been admitted to combat and combat-related roles that were previously the exclusive domain of their male counterparts. This change has produced many benefits, particularly in terms of capability, with women increasingly used on operations to fill roles in FETs, FSTs and FHETs — unconventional roles that cannot be filled by men and which have provided significant tactical advantage on the ground. Domestically, women also feature in border security operations where they are crucial members of TSE, again working alongside their male counterparts and often providing additional capability. Yet these gains have also produced their own conundrums. How will Defence safeguard the extant combat standards (which have been tried and tested on operations) against gender-norming? How will the Australian public respond to the first female death in combat? Will the additional investment in resources to realise the full potential of combat inclusion be reflected in additional capability? It is clear that continued consideration of the issue of ‘value for policy’ is required, while the broader implications for Army of putting women in the so-called ‘front-line’ should also continue to be assessed. The Army is traditionally a conservative entity and not given to rapid change. For the sake of those women who will be the trailblazers of this new policy, implementation should be gradual and considered lest it be compromised by accusations of tokenism and gender norming. This policy has enjoyed a brave start — it deserves the chance to prove itself over time.
GENDER AND SEXUALITY

THE AUTHOR

Lance Corporal Hannah Evans is a member of the Kokoda Foundation and is currently studying towards a Bachelor of International Studies (Politics and international studies) and Languages (Mandarin) through the University of New England while training for her commercial pilot’s licence (helicopter) at the Fleet Flight Training School. She is posted to the University of New South Wales Regiment at Armidale where she is an orderly corporal. She has deployed as a section member on Operation Resolute and on Operations Anode and Astute.

ENDNOTES


3 Melanie Oppenheimer, Australian Women and War, Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Canberra, 2008, p. 222.


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Oppenheimer, Australian Women and War, p. 222.

8 In 1992 a female medical officer was sexually assaulted and sexually harassed during a deployment on HMAS Swan. Following the court martial of the male officer who was charged with the offence (resulting in an acquittal), other female personnel posted aboard HMAS Swan reported their own instances of sexual harassment, gender discrimination and inadequate living quarters, as well as the improper conduct of officers while ashore. The resulting investigation and the negative publicity surrounding the incident prompted a parliamentary inquiry into the issues facing women in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and also into sexual harassment in the ADF. A significant aspect of the inquiry focused on the fact that women had only been integrated into the RAN in the 1990s and that there was a lack of managerial preparation, education and guidance prior to the integration phase. The HMAS Swan incident was at the centre of the inquiry and, at the core of its recommendations, was the assertion that attitudes and traditions of the formerly male-only defence force had to adapt and change to its new inclusive workforce. These incidents also prompted the introduction of sexual harassment training and the extra regimental appointment of Sexual Harassment Officers in units and sub-units. Cited in Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Sexual Harassment in the Australian Defence Force, August 1994, Canberra.


16 In 1993 a preventative program was conducted at the 1st Recruit Training Battalion to reduce the number of pelvic stress fractures of female recruits where there was a fracture incidence of over 11% recorded in a research group of 143 female Army recruits and 0.1% in male recruits (a total of 16 female recruits to 1 male recruit). This incidence was reduced to nil when the route march speed was lowered from 7.5 km/h to a controlled pace of 5 km/h, when female recruits were encouraged to march in their own comfortable step length and on soft grass rather than hard surfaces, and when physical training sessions were changed to interval training sessions. This study recommended that, in order to reduce the risk of lower limb injuries, primarily to female recruits, the route march speed should be lowered, in essence gender-norming the standard for route marches to accommodate female recruits. Cited in Rodney Pope, ‘Prevention of Pelvic Stress Fractures in Female Army Recruits’, Military Medicine, Vol. 164, May 1999, pp. 370–73.


19 In 2009 the Defence Science and Technology Organisation in conjunction with the University of Wollongong established the PES Centre of Expertise. The PES is designed to identify an appropriate set of physical tests for Defence employment groups which are suited to the physical demands of those groups and is currently being implemented across the Army. Cited in Defence Science and Technology Organisation, Physical employment standards, revised 5 December 2012, at: http://www.dsto.defence.gov.au/research/6962/ (accessed 1 July 2013).


21 Ibid. The report noted that, based on the Canadian experience, while the numbers of women within those combat roles and indeed within Defence increased only incrementally (from 0.3% to 3.8% from 1989 to 2006), the implementation plan to include women in the combat arms was successful. The review concluded, however, that for the policy to be successfully implemented in the ADF, there should be a focus on one combat unit/work section/platoon/company within each service and that women should be clustered to achieve a critical mass. This strategy somewhat mirrors the WRAAC unit structure in which women were grouped into that specific corps. By segregating a mass of women into specific sections the implementation plan fails to fully integrate women into combat units in those combat roles and is at risk of further segregating women from their male peers.
One of the issues posed by asymmetrical warfare and counterinsurgency operations is the absence of a formal and defined battlefield. This move away from conventional trench warfare has led to a major rethink in the tasking and training of Army personnel. An important lesson that has been learnt from Afghanistan (in population engagement and counterinsurgency) and from peacekeeping operations is that, by utilising the intrinsic characteristics of members such as gender, race (native language proficiency and ethnicity) and pre-Defence life experiences, engagement and information gathering can be increased and thus overall capability is enhanced. By eliminating the need to provide training in these areas and by drawing on these individual strengths, these features can be a useful and cost-neutral means of improving tactical capability. This was highlighted by Lance Corporal Poppy Wenham who was deployed to Bougainville as a driver and signaller and who was utilised in patrols as she spoke Pidgin (the native language) and could easily engage with the local population. Cited in Oppenheimer, Australian Women and War, 2008, p. 229.

