

# Women on the front line

## Vix Anderton on the obstacles facing female soldiers in combat roles

In December 2014, the Ministry of Defence published a review into women in close-combat roles, where individuals on the ground are required to close with and kill the enemy. This appears to open the door for women serving in the Infantry, the Royal Armoured Corps, the Royal Marines General Service and the RAF Regiment for the first time.

Such a step is long overdue: it has been 15 years since the Canadian government removed similar restrictions; three since the Australian Defence Force followed suit; two years since the US announced a similar move; while other allies including Denmark, Germany and New Zealand no longer discriminate on the grounds of sex.

The review is not a ringing endorsement for women to serve in all roles in the British military, though it does seem to close the debate on cohesion, the ability of mixed sex units to perform as a team.

Its opening recommendation is that the Ministry of Defence should adopt a positive approach to the issue but it stops short of endorsing a policy change, citing the need for more research into the physiological risks of women in close-combat roles.

While the Defence Secretary at the time expressed the clear hope that 'roles in our armed forces should be determined by ability not gender', a final decision is not expected until 2016.

### Achieving Critical Mass

With the significant emphasis in the review on physiology – both the physical abilities of women and the apparent heightened risks to women serving in close-combat roles – the pivotal issue of critical mass is somewhat overlooked.

Critical mass, as defined by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a Harvard Business School leadership expert, is the point at which the inclusion of a minority within a group becomes a norm. When critical mass is achieved, an individual's primary identity is defined by their place in the team, rather than by attributes such as gender, ethnicity or religion that define the minority.

Failure to achieve critical mass will result in continuing discrimination, subconscious or not.

The Women's Research and Education Institute suggested in 1990 that the minority must hold around 30 per cent of jobs in such contexts before they can exert real influence. Currently, 4.5 per cent of female Army entrants meet the basic physical standards, although this could be raised to 20 per cent with targeted training.

The MoD expects about 45 women a year could join the four major ground close-combat units; over a 24-year career, this would result in approximately 60 women serving in the Infantry and 150 in the Royal Armoured Corps, based on contemporary drop out rates both during training and through early departures.

It is highly unlikely that the 30 per cent level for women will be achieved in the armed forces as a whole, let alone in the close-combat units, so ways must be found to address this problem if policy change is to be anything other than tokenistic.

The Australian Human Rights Commission's review into the treatment of women in the *Australian Defence Force Phase 2 Report* recommended no fewer than two females per combat section (up to 12 people) to achieve critical mass. It also suggested clustering women in units; although this risks simply segregating women, it may offer a short-term solution while numbers grow. The other obvious measure is to increase recruitment of women across the armed forces to provide a larger pool from which to draw female personnel into the close-combat units.

### Understanding the Challenge

There is justifiable emphasis on understanding the comparative physical and mental resilience of women to close with and kill the enemy. However, the review's greatest weakness is its failure to analyse or question the statistics. It never asks why female personnel are more likely to report mental health problems than men, as it suggests; is this because women are more

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predisposed to such issues or because they are more likely to seek help when experiencing symptoms?

Nor does the review discuss the need to examine the current levels of recruitment for women. With 94 per cent of roles in the RAF open to both sexes, and yet only 17 per cent of officers and 13 per cent of other ranks women, there is clearly an issue with how women view a career in the military. The situation is no better in the Royal Navy, where women comprise 10 per cent of officers and 9 per cent of other ranks; in the Army, 70 per cent of roles are open to women but they make up only 12 per cent of officers and 8 per cent of other ranks.

### What Next?

The two most common arguments against the inclusion of women have traditionally been the threat to unit cohesion and their lack of physical ability. The review concludes that the negative issues associated with unit cohesion are likely to be fleeting and to be offset by collective experience and strong leadership. The management of the physiological risks will be challenging but could be met through suitable training.

The outstanding questions for the MoD are how to ensure a sufficient critical mass of female personnel to prevent discrimination, and how to improve both the recruitment and retention of women in the armed forces. Most importantly, the armed forces need to recognize the benefits of increasing the number of women serving and the number of roles open to them. With a people-centric approach likely to be a feature of any future conflict, which will require innovative strategies to win, the MoD will need to maximize the available talent; as the report acknowledges, much of this untapped pool of talent is female.

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