



Officer candidate stands at attention during Medal of Honor run at Officer Candidates School aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia, August 15, 2019 (U.S. Marine Corps/Phuchung Nguyen)

# Buy Now, Get Paid with Diversity Later

## Insights into Career Progression of Female Servicemembers

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The Department of Defense (DOD) recognizes the value that diversity brings to the joint force. In 2015, the Secretary of Defense directed DOD to establish an environment where all personnel have the opportunity to rise to the “highest level of responsibility as their abilities allow.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the directive promotes “a strategic vision for total force diversity and inclusion as a unifying core value and factor of readiness for Servicemembers and civilian employees.” The notion that diverse teams provide more creative and innovative solutions to problems is well researched and supported.<sup>2</sup> To reap the full benefits of diversity, DOD must foster intentional inclusivity. The Nation has made great strides toward inclusivity over the past few decades—today, for instance, women orbit the earth on

the International Space Station and patrol the depths of the ocean on Navy submarines. There are, however, hurdles yet to clear. DOD must address tangible and intangible program costs to develop an environment of inclusivity. Integrating women into typically male-dominated career fields requires resource investment in equipment, facilities, and processes. Decisionmakers must implement these accommodations now to build tomorrow's gender-inclusive leadership team.

### The Costs of Gender Integration

Integrating women into a unit or environment that has been traditionally staffed exclusively by men costs the government resources. The 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule specifically named costs of accommodating “berthing and privacy” as a valid reason to restrict women from filling specific positions.<sup>3</sup> The Navy has cited “return on investment” as its reason for not opening positions to women on ships with scheduled decommissioning dates.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the 2013 policy changes allowing women to fill previously closed positions in combat units have taken years to implement. Women are still not completely integrated into some units a full 3 years after the 2016 opening of “all” positions to women. Strategic-level studies and working groups have been commissioned in an effort to identify the process, facility, equipment, and other changes required to support mixed-gender teams in combat units and locations. The Government Accountability Office determined the Services conducted more than 40 studies between 2013 and 2015; the studies cost the Nation and DOD money, time, and labor force hours.<sup>5</sup>

Facilities and equipment constitute the most tangible costs of integrating women into previously male-dominated positions, while less tangible costs include the time and labor hours of navigating integration decisions when no processes exist. One of the most substantial changes was the repeal of the restriction referred to as the “collocation rule.” This

rule “could restrict units and positions that were doctrinally required to physically collocate and remain with direct ground combat units that were otherwise closed to women.”<sup>6</sup> Its repeal in 2012 opened more than 13,000 positions and 6 additional specialties to women and authorized them to work and live in locations originally designed to support only men from a spatial and process prospective.<sup>7</sup>

Opening new locations for mixed-sex teams requires resources to transform facilities' sleeping quarters, showers, and toilets. Facility costs could include any level of support—from finding a tarp to divide a sleeping tent to house both sexes to procuring a building for a women's dorm. Leadership will likely use existing facilities to accommodate women in these environments. Repurposing existing spaces is a low-cost decision from a monetary standpoint, but it is not without other less tangible costs. Deployed members often share sleeping quarters with fellow unit members according to their respective shift schedules, duty responsibilities, and places of duty. When a location has only a small number of women, the women are normally given one room or building for sleeping quarters and bunked together, with minimal other considerations such as rank, unit, or specialty. Because these women will likely be from different units and working various shifts, living in the same small space could ruin their sleep schedules. Lack of sleep could have a cascading negative effect on morale, work performance, and—of utmost importance—workplace safety.<sup>8</sup> The current process for assigning sleeping quarters is built for a *homogenous* team, and thus leadership must invest time to ensure that women have adequate accommodations that do not present unnecessary barriers to mission success.

Because integrating women into organizations comes with costs, a resource-constrained leader may exclude a female officer from a high-visibility opportunity—not as a matter of conscious discrimination, but in an effort to save government resources (for example, additional planning, organizational realignments, processes, or even

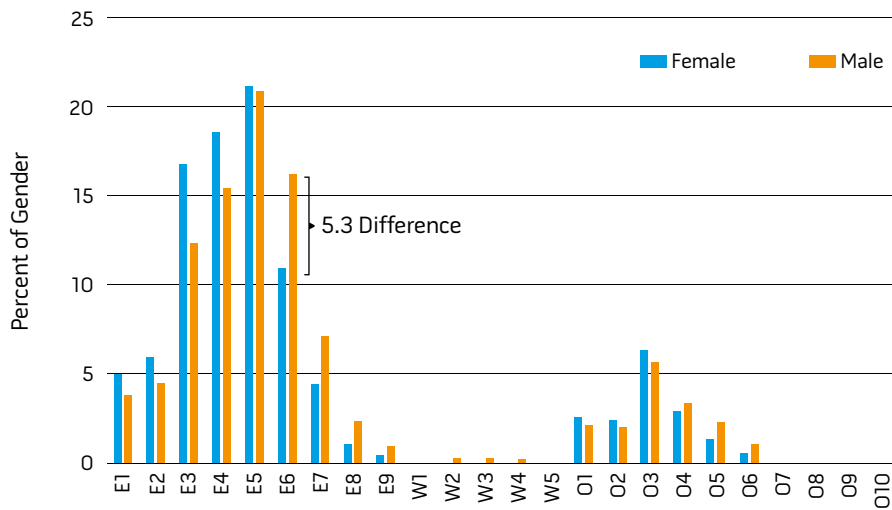
procurements). At a tactical level, commanders make decisions daily regarding how best to accommodate both sexes in the field. From basic training units to combat deployments, commanders are forced to adjust accommodations and “make it work” with what they have.

### Career Progression

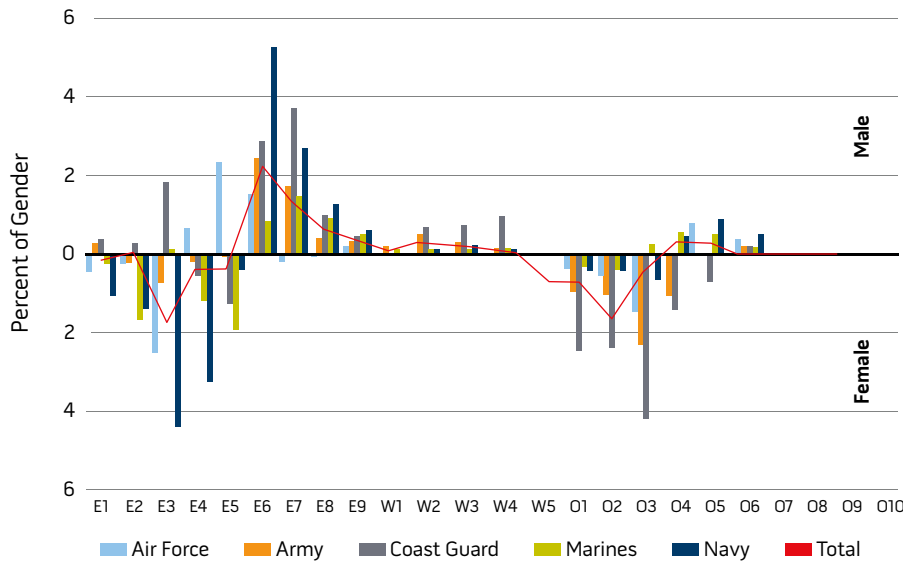
Potential costs or inefficiencies can arise when utilizing mixed-sex teams, especially if only men have traditionally filled the roles or worked at the location. A decision to avoid these investments can have negative second- and third-order effects for female officers' career progressions. Simply put, a leader's cost-based decision could unintentionally change the trajectory of an officer's career. Consider the following hypothetical situation: Two young officers volunteer for a high-visibility deployment to an austere hostile fire zone.<sup>9</sup> Because the forward operating base has limited facilities and all current team members are men, the commander chooses to send the male officer instead of the female officer on the deployment to ease the logistic requirements of the already complicated short-notice deployment. What seemed like a simple and efficient decision at the time resulted in the female officer missing out on valuable operational experience and knowledge—which can lead to weaker records and missed promotion opportunities.

The male officer who deployed had a chance to learn his trade and demonstrate leadership during combat operations. His commander rewarded him accordingly with annual awards, decorations, and highly stratified performance reports. The female officer, who stayed at her home station, also demonstrated excellence and received the annual awards and reports expected during a steady-state non-combat environment. All things being equal, when these records are compared, demonstrated leadership in a combat environment is a more impressive accomplishment. A few years later, the same two officers will compete against each other for command selection. The male officer, the proven combat leader, is selected for

**Figure 1. Navy Rank Distribution by Gender**



**Figure 2. Gender: Rank Distribution**



command based on the operational experience shown in the records. Selection and success as a commander are decisive points in career progression in all military branches.<sup>10</sup>

The second-order effect of command selection, or lack of selection, further compounds the problem facing the female officer: lack of experience. She has now missed the opportunity to garner command experience. Next, these officers will compete for professional military education selection, and the male officer, a graduated commander with combat experience, will be an easy choice over

the female officer, who did not command. This narrow example shows how a seemingly insignificant decision based on limited resources could have second- and third-order effects on an officer's career progression. It is possible that missed opportunities could cumulate in a less competitive record for promotion to the rank of O6.

Figure 1 shows data drawn from the 2018 Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) annual report. The figure indicates the percentage of men and women at a given rank specifically for the Navy. It is

important to compare the percentage of the genders at the various ranks and not look at simple numbers of personnel by gender because significantly more men than women are in the military.

On the surface, figure 1 depicts the same basic distribution across the ranks, indicating advancement across the ranks is similar.<sup>11</sup> DACOWITS also provided charts for the other Services. The Navy's chart revealed the highest difference at any rank, specifically at E6, between the sexes. Approximately 10.9 percent of women and 16.2 percent of men are at the E6 rank in the Navy, indicating a difference of 5.3 percent. All career-related factors being equal (for example, attrition, advancement opportunities), the percentages should be comparable—but the data reveal otherwise.

Figure 2 highlights the differences between the sexes across all ranks and Services. The difference of 5.3 percent, discussed for figure 1, is seen as the highest peak at E6 in figure 2. A DOD trend exists along the red line (total military) across the ranks, which shows greater percentages of men in ranks of E6 to E9 and O5 to O10 and greater concentrations of women in the lower ranks of E1 to E5 and O1 to O4.

But highlighting the lower percentage of women in a specific rank does not address why such discrepancies exist. Considerable research has examined female retention in the military, but few studies address whether the retention rate is due to differences in promotion potential.<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to separate retention from promotion because if Servicemembers are not retained, they cannot be promoted. A 2016 RAND study analyzed multiple factors in relation to career progression for both genders. Researchers could not infer from the results that family status, such as being married or having dependents, causes gender-related differences in retention or promotion potential. The study concluded that occupational disparities, such as career field assigned, were the main discriminators at the O5 retention milestone, and deployment experience emerged as the main discriminator for promotion to O6. Researchers have



Sailors assigned to USS *Porter* apply jubilee pipe patch during damage control competition at Naval Support Activity Souda Bay, Greece, October 24, 2017 (U.S. Navy/Krystina Coffey)

consistently shown that a history of key assignments and deployment experiences is directly related to promotion potential for both sexes. If resource considerations prevent female officers from selective opportunities to garner needed and valued experience, then they will not be as competitive for key assignments, education programs, and, ultimately, promotion. And the trend depicted in the figures above continues.

### Submarine Integration

In 2011, the Navy submarine force used working groups to design a gender integration plan that incorporated the doctrines of processes, facilities, and equipment; its execution shows how successful female integration could be when leadership dedicates time and resources to inclusion efforts. The Navy's "silent service" made one of the

most dramatic changes to its 111-year history when four groups of female Sailors reported to the USS *Wyoming*, USS *Georgia*, USS *Maine*, and USS *Ohio*.<sup>13</sup> The first group of female Sailors stepped on board the USS *Ohio* (SSGN 726) in 2011 with a carefully laid-out implementation plan developed by senior leadership.<sup>14</sup> One O3 supply officer with prior surface ship experience reported at the same time as a nuclear-trained O2 officer. To ensure a successful experience, these officers were required to be well versed in their specialty and top performers in their respective fields. The supply officer had served previously on a surface ship and had a proven leadership record. Soon after, enlisted female Sailors reported aboard the submarine as well.

Berthing arrangements were easily arranged in the first group, as the supply

officer is typically given a two-person stateroom. Common-use heads were set up with ease, due to the close proximity of an already restricted-use head to approximately 10 officers who each live within 20 feet of it. A simple sign was made to signify that the head was occupied by a woman. To accommodate enlisted female Sailors, modifications were made to the ship to expand one of the two heads used by the male crew, and the other facility was dedicated for female use. This modification cost the crew "lounging" space, used for socializing while off watch, and construction costs. Other modifications have been requested by currently serving female submariners to account for height or strength challenges faced in the workplace. For example, emergency air breathing connections have been lowered on a few ships to accommodate the average height of female



Navy Sonar Technician (Surface) First Class Allison Coughlin mans helm of USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, Pacific Ocean, March 4, 2021 (U.S. Navy/Alexander Williams)

submariners. The Navy has stated that all future submarines will be designed for integrated crews.<sup>15</sup>

Submarine supply officers (male or female) serve only one tour on any submarine platform; those who serve on submarines gain a reputation for being the sharpest of their peers and are often selected for competitive high-visibility follow-on tours. A tour as a supply submariner will have a positive impact on the experience, knowledge, record, and promotion potential of the Sailor assigned.

The nuclear-trained submarine officer career path, once designated as submarine service, will typically progress under ship-to-shore rotation until the unrestricted line officer submariner is selected for command as an O5 or O6. Command is the pinnacle of the

submariner career and leads to competition for flag officer selection. It will take until approximately the year 2026 until the first cohort of women will be eligible to command a Navy submarine.<sup>16</sup> Of the first 19 female submarine officers, 5 have decided to sign a contract to go back to sea as a department head: 4 are engineers and 1 is a navigator. These are typical selections for top-tier nuclear-trained officers. The remaining 14 women either left the military, will soon leave, or are serving elsewhere in the Navy—nearly the same retention rate as that of male submariners. Leadership acknowledges that it will take time and money to make the required equipment modifications during the submarines' scheduled overhauls and to build trained, integrated crews on every class of submarine. The

*Los Angeles* class of submarines, because of advanced age, will “age out” without integration modifications; however, the new *Columbia*-class ballistic missile submarines are being constructed with full integration in mind.<sup>17</sup>

There are female Sailors anxiously waiting to join the submarine fleet.<sup>18</sup> The speed at which the Navy integrates each platform will influence the opportunities for these women to serve and gain experience from such high-visibility tours. This example shows a successful case study of expending integration planning time and resources to create accommodations for women in key assignments. The cost considerations were deliberately intertwined with the ship maintenance schedules to minimize mission impact. DOD needs to support future efforts to remove

limitations on the number of women accepted and accessioned into the elite submariner community.

## Recommendations

It is imperative to provide an accepting and inclusive environment for both sexes. Simply having women on teams will not allow them to excel as professionals. What might DOD members do to remedy the disparity that might exist in a fiscally constrained environment? DOD could implement the following recommendations to attain the value of diversity:

- spend money and resources for modifications and accommodations
- educate decisionmakers
- review policies and processes for the removal of barriers
- build an inclusive future.

DOD must be willing to pay for the inherent costs of inclusion initiatives, such as upgrades or changes to facilities, equipment, and processes. Spending money and time incorporating women into the force is not a new idea. A Presidential memorandum from 2016 directed agencies to prioritize resources to expand professional development, key assignments, and career advancement opportunities of women and minorities.<sup>19</sup> A miniscule investment tomorrow could create a more diverse senior leadership team 10 years from now.

Maya Angelou declared, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” A key to successfully changing the culture of an organization is education. DOD must educate decisionmakers about the potential negative consequences a resource-based decision could have on the department’s diversity and inclusivity goals and Servicemembers’ careers. DOD should urge decisionmakers at all levels, from tactical-level unit deployment managers to Members of Congress, to consider the ripple effects resource decisions could have on gender inclusivity.

DOD leaders should review current policies and processes to identify any potential equality or career progression barriers they might be creating or

propagating. For example, the “Leaders First” policy, which is applicable to the Army and Marine Corps, requires female leaders and trainers to be in a unit prior to allowing junior enlisted women of the same branch to serve in the unit.<sup>20</sup> The other Services have added similar informal policies. The Navy, for instance, requires a specific number of trained and integrated female officers on a submarine crew prior to including enlisted women, as outlined in the submarine integration example above. The Air Force also has used an informal two-woman policy on some deployment, missile, and aircraft crews. Leaders intended these policies to be helpful from a resource, logistic, and safety perspective; however, such guidelines could be limiting the potential of those female Servicemembers who are ready to serve prior to the competitive units meeting all the stipulations required for integration.

Additionally, inadequate or antiquated processes designed to support all-male units must be identified and updated. Commanders and senior enlisted leaders spend far too much time analyzing situations and deciding how to make integrated teams work with existing resources; providing these leaders with processes for inclusive teams could alleviate the burden. DOD should re-vamp processes to assume that all teams would need accommodations for both men and women at any given number, not at a preset number. For example, it is inadequate to state a unit has eight spots for women due to lodging availability. A process needs to exist to support an integrated team for any number of gender mix. Setting a specified number of women does not support the DOD objective to match the best person, regardless of gender, with the job. It is time to stop prioritizing cost savings, efficiency, and convenience over equality in DOD. Identify the policies and processes that are limiting the potential of women and eliminate them.

DOD needs to build the joint force with gender inclusivity in mind and modify current and future initiatives as needed to accommodate gender-inclusive teams. Building the cost of inclusion

into the future DOD weapons systems, deployment packages, and training programs— even if it costs more money at the outset—will yield the dividends of a diverse and inclusive group of warfighters. For example, unisex personal protective equipment might be acceptable in some circumstances, but there are items that must be tailor-made based on an individual’s body shape. DOD must assume gender inclusivity for every program, unit, deployed location, and career field from the inception, and program the costs of accommodation as requirements to support warfighting readiness.

## Conclusion

Gender inclusion comes with both tangible and intangible costs. Decisionmakers must pay these costs now, break down barriers for women, and ensure the development of experienced diverse leaders for the future. The various expenses associated with gender inclusion span items as obvious as funding a study to less apparent costs such as labor force hours spent on berthing or lodging arrangement plans and decisions. The hypothetical example above attests to how a seemingly small resource-based decision can change the course of an individual’s career progression. The analysis of DOD rank distribution by gender reveals a plain and sobering trend. The submarine gender integration strategy makes clear that planning and adequate resources can make available key assignments for female Servicemembers.

Establishing considered, intentional plans for gender inclusivity, as the submarine example demonstrated, and following the recommendations outlined herein will help DOD ensure equal opportunity for female Servicemembers. Many areas are ripe for further study and quantitative analysis in this area, given the numerous policy and processes changes since 2013. As DOD continues to implement changes, commit resources, and realize gender inclusivity, it will eventually reap the benefits of a diverse and inclusive joint force. JFQ

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense Directive 1020.02E, *Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity in the DOD* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 8, 2015), available at <[www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/102002p.pdf?ver=2019-03-11-081757-483](http://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/102002p.pdf?ver=2019-03-11-081757-483)>.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Frost, “Why Diversity Initiatives Fail,” *HRZone*, October 20, 2017, available at <[www.hrzone.com/lead/culture/why-diversity-initiatives-fail](http://www.hrzone.com/lead/culture/why-diversity-initiatives-fail)>.

<sup>3</sup> Secretary of Defense memorandum, “Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule,” Washington, DC, January 13, 1994, available at <[www.govexec.com/pdfs/031910d1.pdf](http://www.govexec.com/pdfs/031910d1.pdf)>.

<sup>4</sup> Lory Manning, *Women in the Military: Where They Stand*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington, DC: Service Women’s Action Network, 2019), available at <[www.servicewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/SWAN-Where-we-stand-2019-0416revised.pdf](http://www.servicewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/SWAN-Where-we-stand-2019-0416revised.pdf)>.

<sup>5</sup> Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Military Personnel: DOD Is Expanding Combat Service Opportunities for Women, but Should Monitor Long-Term Integration Progress*, GAO-15-589 (Washington, DC: GAO, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> “Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule.”

<sup>7</sup> Manning, *Women in the Military*.

<sup>8</sup> Wendy M. Troxel et al., *Sleep in the Military: Promoting Healthy Sleep Among U.S. Servicemembers* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Based on real events informally collected; actual persons and events have been generically described to keep the situation anonymous.

<sup>10</sup> *From Representation to Inclusion: Diversity Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Military* (Arlington, VA: Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, *DACOWITS 2018 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, December 2018), available at <<https://dacowits.defense.gov/Portals/48/Documents/Reports/2018/Annual%20Report/DACOWITS%20Annual%20Report%202018.pdf>>.

<sup>12</sup> Beth J. Asch, Trey Miller, and Gabriel Weinberger, *Can We Explain Gender Differences in Officer Career Progression?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> “First Female Submarine Officers Prepared for Navy Challenges,” *Military Hub* (2011), available at <[www.militaryhub.com/article?id=369](http://www.militaryhub.com/article?id=369)>.

<sup>14</sup> Ray Maybus, memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, “Department of the Navy Women in the Service Review Implementation Plan,” May 2, 2013, available at <<https://wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Navy-WISR-Implementation-Plan1.pdf>>.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Beardsley, “First Female Officer Reports to Submarine USS *Minnesota*,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 14, 2015, available at <[www.stripes.com/news/navy/1st-female-officer-reports-to-submarine-uss-minnesota-1.323819](http://www.stripes.com/news/navy/1st-female-officer-reports-to-submarine-uss-minnesota-1.323819)>.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer McDermott, “Navy Hits Major Milestone for Women in Submarines,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 8, 2018, available at <[www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2018/0308/Navy-hits-major-milestone-for-women-in-submarines](http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2018/0308/Navy-hits-major-milestone-for-women-in-submarines)>.

<sup>17</sup> William Cole, “Navy Boosts Number of Women on Submarines,” *Military.com*, May 8, 2018, available at <[www.military.com/daily-news/2018/05/08/navy-boosts-number-women-submarines.html](http://www.military.com/daily-news/2018/05/08/navy-boosts-number-women-submarines.html)>.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Towle, commander, Submarine Force Atlantic, Women in Submarines Representative, interview by Warren Korban Blackburn, May 5, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Presidential memorandum, “Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the National Security Workforce,” Washington, DC, October 5, 2016, available at <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/10/05/presidential-memorandum-promoting-diversity-and-inclusion-national>>.

<sup>20</sup> *HQDA Execution Order 097-16 to the U.S. Army Implementation Plan 2016-01 (Army Gender Integration)* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, March 9, 2016), available at <[https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/WISR\\_Implementation\\_Plan\\_Army.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/WISR_Implementation_Plan_Army.pdf)>.