



Center for a
New American
Security

DECEMBER 10, 2019

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL

Hearing on Diversity in Recruiting and Retention: Increasing Diversity in the Military –
What the Military Services are Doing

Increasing Diversity in the Military: Recruiting and Retaining Talented Women

BY

Kayla Williams

*Senior Fellow and Director of the Military, Veterans, and Society Program
Center for a New American Security*

I. Boots-on-the-Ground Assessment

Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Kelly, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss a topic I believe is of vital importance to the long-term strength of United States military. I want to begin with some personal examples of what drove me to enlist in the Army in 2000 – and then to not reenlist when my term was up in 2005.

A combination of factors inspired my military service. I grew up with a single mom; our precarious financial situation meant we were occasionally on food stamps and I got free or reduced price school lunches. The anxiety and shame of growing up in poverty was coupled with gratitude that the nation had invested in me. As a young adult, the military not only offered me enhanced financial stability, through both military training in valuable skills and access to higher education in the civilian sector via the GI Bill, but it also provided a way for me to repay the country for the lifeline it offered when I was a child. My deep appreciation for the social safety net has guided me toward a life of service and deepened my commitment to equality for all.

Luckily, I was able to meet accession standards for enlistment, something that today only 1 in 4 young people can do. And because the key disqualifiers – obesity, lack of a high school diploma, and criminal backgrounds – are more prevalent in poor communities, those who would potentially benefit the most from the military's promise of a pathway out of poverty are least likely to be able to join. This is reflected in the socioeconomic backgrounds of those who serve today: those in the lowest income quintile are underrepresented compared to those in the middle class.

During my five years in the Army, which included a year-long deployment to the Middle East during Operation Iraqi Freedom, I acquired both tangible skills such as knowledge of Arabic and life-saving first aid, and invaluable intangible attributes such as perseverance and confidence. The latter, unfortunately, were often developed at great cost; the stresses of military life can enhance long-term resilience. Two particularly challenging areas that contributed to my choice not to continue serving disproportionately affect women: experiencing sexual misconduct and frustratingly outdated policies.

Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment, and Gender Discrimination in the Military

As a woman, I faced chronic and pervasive gender discrimination and sexual harassment. This ranged from the relatively subtle, such as snide comments about women's physical weakness as demonstrated by differential physical fitness standards, to the somewhat more obvious, including being required to participate in offensive cadences like "A Yellow Bird." There were also unavoidably inappropriate experiences, such as being repeatedly sexually propositioned by a peer who was not held accountable after I reported the incident. In the most egregious example I personally experienced, while in Iraq, a fellow soldier tried to force me to touch his penis, which technically qualifies as unwanted sexual contact though I personally characterized it as an extreme example of sexual harassment. Given the inaction when I had formally reported in the past, I chose to raise this incident informally with his front-line supervisor. He was moved to a different location with nothing in his permanent record; I experienced social retaliation when he spread malicious rumors about me. I also had to live with gnawing regret for not taking stronger action, fearing I had put other women at risk of his behavior escalating.

My examples from over a decade ago may seem to no be longer relevant. Regrettably, that is not the case. The estimated rate of past-year sexual assault of Active Duty women in 2018, at 6.2 percent, was barely down from 2006, when it was 6.8 percent. It was over six times higher than the rate for men, at 0.7 percent. Sexual assault rates are worse for LGB servicemembers at 9.0 percent of LGB women and 3.7 percent of LGB men, compared to 4.8 percent and 0.4 percent of non-LGB women and men, respectively. DoD also estimated that nearly one in four Active Duty women experienced sexual harassment in 2018, and 16 percent experienced gender discrimination. Reporting remains low, and retaliation high.¹ A recently released report on organizational culture in the Marine Corps, which has the

highest rates of assault and harassment of the services, contains a number of first-person anecdotes that give valuable context to these dry statistics. Depressingly, women serving today, nearly fifteen years after I left the military, continue to report similar experiences to my own.²

My negative experiences in this realm of behavior were a contributing factor when I was weighing whether to reenlist. In this, too, I was not unique. The RAND Military Workplace Study, for which I was a contributing author, found that of service members who had experienced sexual harassment or gender discrimination in the past year, 42 percent said the events had made them “want to leave the military;” among women with these experiences, roughly a quarter indicated they were “very unlikely” to stay on active duty, compared to 11 percent who had not had those experiences.³ The ongoing scourges of sexual assault, harassment, and discrimination in the military harms retention.

For many years, military leadership has publicly proclaimed a zero-tolerance policy for sexual assault in the ranks. That has not been reflected in decreased rates or increased successful prosecution. Women often report the perception that when they report, the paramount concern is protecting the career of the perpetrator. The specter of false accusations (which in reality are extremely rare) potentially ruining a man’s career also looms large in the list of possible “downsides” to vigorously taking on this problem. The data does not support that fear, however. Men who have been credibly accused of serious sexual misconduct may have had some damage done to their reputations but still occupy some of the most influential positions of power in this country. In order for progress to truly be made on this issue, leaders must acknowledge that careers *are* being ruined – women’s careers. Particularly given that a very small percent of men commit sexual assault – but those that do tend to be repeat offenders – leaders must put more importance on retaining qualified women than criminal men. The time for excuses is over. Rigorous and sustained efforts at culture change coupled with seriously accountability within the military works. For example, only 0.7 percent of military personnel reported using any illicit drug in the past year compared to 16.6 percent of U.S. adults. Why? Because within the military, drug use is not culturally condoned and is swiftly punished. In comparison, if rates of sexual assault within the military are at all comparable to rates in the civilian sector, it clearly demonstrates that far more potential perpetrators believe it is tacitly culturally condoned at the local level, that they will not get caught, and that they would not get punished if they did. They must be proven wrong on each count.

Extensive coverage of this ongoing concern could affect recruiting as well. Anecdotally, I have been approached by many young women – as well as parents of young women – asking me to candidly share my experiences and inquiring whether I would recommend military service specifically given this risk. In surveys, women are also far less likely to report considering the military as a possible career path.

Outdated Policies

My husband and I met and married while still on Active Duty. This is not unusual: of married military women, nearly half are in dual-military marriages. Watching my husband deteriorate with inadequate support from either his chain of command or the military medical system after he sustained a penetrating traumatic brain injury and subsequently developed post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, and substance use disorder was the other major contributing factor to my decision to leave the Army. It was quite clear to me that he needed more support than I would be able to provide while also balancing the intense time demands of a military career. Once he was stabilized, however, at that time there was no easily accessible pathway by which I could resume service.

Women are more likely to face caregiving demands from parents, spouses, and children, and the stresses related to balancing family demands with military careers have been linked to women’s higher rates of attrition.⁴ Changing economic realities and cultural norms also mean that the retention challenges associated with inadequate flexibility and support, particularly for those in dual-military marriages, will increasingly be a concern for both sexes.⁵ However, today they still disproportionately affect women – and the strain shows not only in decreased retention but also in higher divorce rates for military women. The services should continue to aggressively move forward with

implementation of recently authorized, modernized policies that enhance career flexibility, ensuring those who take advantage of them do not experience harm to their promotion potential.

These are not the only types of policies that disproportionately affect women in a negative way. Those who exceed height-weight standards – which frequently includes athletic, muscular women who score highly on physical fitness tests – are subjected to “tape tests” to determine their body fat percentage, a problem that will likely be exacerbated by new physical fitness tests that have higher standards. The tape tests are known to be highly inaccurate, particularly for women and African Americans. Military body fat standards were set in 1984 and have not been subjected since to rigorous scientific review despite advances in understanding of variations across populations. The act of being called out as exceeding weight standards and pulled aside to be taped is embarrassing, even for obviously fit women who intellectually understand these problems. These even lead some to resort to unhealthy measures such as restricting food and liquid intake in the days leading up to testing in hopes of shaving off a few precious pounds, which harms performance and ultimately health. Military pilots are held to a narrow range of acceptable iron levels; when women’s levels temporarily dip during menstruation they must request a waiver from their typically male commanders to continue flying, a conversation that is also quite embarrassing.

Equipment is also often ill-fitting for women. When we deployed to Iraq, one of my team members was forced to wear black, non-breathable jump boots because there were no desert boots available in her size. An employee at the clothing issue facility actually told her they did not believe her feet were that small and that she would have to go to the hospital to get a foot x-ray to prove her shoe size. Socks available for troops to purchase in Iraq were only ever size large. Problems with body armor not designed to accommodate women’s body shapes are well-documented.

Each of these small indignities alone is minor and easy to ignore. Cumulatively, they constitute a barrier that contributes to driving down women’s retention. A friend who serves on DACOWITS calls it “death by a thousand cuts:” the combination of near-daily personal interactions, waiver requirements, and outdated policies that serve as a constant reminder that as a woman you are “other,” outside who was being considered when norms were established, forced to struggle to fit yourself into an institution designed for men.

II. The Way Forward

The services should swiftly and decisively move to modernize recruiting efforts and retain diverse talent. Recruiting strategy modernization efforts, while shifting in the right direction, are moving at a snail’s pace; it appears the Air Force and the Navy are thinking most critically about these issues. The services face a public uninterested, unknowledgeable, and misinformed about both the military and the realities of service. To recruit not only the best talent, but to build strength through diversity, each service will need to work harder and smarter at communicating with the public, youth populations, and their own ranks about the value proposition and needs of the military long term. Challenges in recruiting diverse populations in particular, either demographic or skillset, is largely due to the services’ internal reticence to challenge their sense of self.

For instance, there is no reason that services cannot or should not set significantly more aggressive goals for recruiting women – and raise them again once they are met. In the past, constraints on throughput of trainees set artificial limits on the number of women by branch or field. Lack of ambition sets its own limits. For example, once the Marine Corps met its goal of having women make up 10 percent of aviators, growth froze. The services should seek continual improvement to ensure a more representative force. Why not strive for 50 percent female representation? Other than occasionally fielding an ad featuring a woman, outreach has not significantly changed. Leadership often says women “vote with their feet,” yet do little to address well-documented concerns unique to the female youth population.⁶ Recent recruiting efforts have focused on the nebulous “cyber” market. The failure of these existing initiatives despite the services’ desperate need for technical talent illustrate overarching difficulties. First, the services fail to understand the market and how to attract individuals with a cyber skillset.⁷ Second, the services fail to meet potential recruits where they are.

Because each service is focused on its legacy and perceived identity, each has been unable to rethink recruiting in a way that will drive true change. Allies such as Australia have recognized gaps in recruiting women and minorities and responded by creating specific programs to bring interested individuals up to speed, either with educational attainment or physical fitness. The United Kingdom fielded ads that spoke to the concerns of the youth generation and saw great initial success.⁸ Congress has awarded the military immense provisions to bring in talent, yet the services are far from fully embracing these provisions. Pilot programs should challenge existing recruiting practices to be more flexible, and DoD should review medical disqualifications for the modern age.⁹ The services should also heed DACOWITS' thoughtful, well-researched, and carefully-considered recommendations to improve both recruiting and retention of women, of which members of this committee are certainly aware.

While this hearing is devoted to what the services are doing and can do, I would be remiss to not also mention the role Congress can play – within and beyond the military. The school lunch program that helped me was established shortly after WWII, inspired in part by military testimony that 8 percent of potential recruits were rejected from or placed in limited service due to malnutrition or undernourishment. Today, over 30 percent of young Americans are disqualified from military service due to obesity, but this administration has rolled back efforts to make school lunches healthier and more nutritious. Congress can use its power of legislation and appropriation to expand the pool of young people who qualify to access into the military by reducing obesity, increasing physical fitness, continuing educational gains, and tackling criminal justice reform to end the toxic school-to-prison pipeline – all problems that disproportionately affect poor and minority communities. Congress can also refuse to allow discriminatory policies such as the ban on military service by transgender individuals, which not only directly excludes transgender personnel but also sends a message to all young people that the military is unwelcoming to diverse populations and does not align with their values on inclusivity and acceptance.

Our nation's diversity is its greatest strength, and it is imperative that our military be representative of the population it serves. This is not simply a warm and fuzzy platitude. It is also coldly rational. Diverse teams perform better, and the military should compete for top talent across all demographic sectors in a rapidly diversifying nation. While I have focused primarily on women today, these issues are broad-ranging and intersectional. Additionally, recent Army challenges in meeting recruiting goals demonstrate very clearly that we risk critical failure should there be a national security need to dramatically expand the size of the force. It is imperative that we increase the percent of the population that can meet military standards, improve recruitment so troops better reflect our nation, and dramatically enhance efforts to retain talented personnel once they are serving.

Thank you.

¹ DoD Office of People Analytics, "2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members Overview Report," May 2019, https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/Annex_1_2018_WGRA_Overview_Report.pdf

² Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project Report to Personnel Studies and Oversight Office, "Marines' Perspectives on Various Aspects of Marine Corps Organizational Culture," https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/CAOCL/files/MCOOCR%20Report%20to%20PSO%2030Mar18_wDem_FINAL.pdf?ver=2019-09-05-135301-060.

³ "Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Military: Volume 2. Estimates for Department of Defense Service Members from the 2014 RAND Military Workplace Study," available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR870z2-1.html pages 48-49.

⁴ See for example RAND studies on both the Air Force https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2073.html and Coast Guard https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2770.html.

⁵ For a deep dive into these challenges as well as proposed solutions, see Tom Barron's "To Retain Today's Talent, the DoD Must Support Dual-Professional Couples" at <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/to-retain-todays-talent-the-dod-must-support-dual-professional-couples>.

⁶ Taylor Fairley, "An Overview: Prepared for the Defense Advisory Committee for Women in the Services (DACOWITS)," *Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services*, December 2017, <https://dacowits.defense.gov/Portals/48/Documents/General%20Documents/RFI%20Docs/Dec2017/OPA%20RFI%202.pdf?ver=2017-12-06-100540-760>. Army Enterprise Marketing Office, "DACOWITS December 2019 Quarterly Meeting," *Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services*, December 5, 2019, <https://dacowits.defense.gov/Portals/48/Documents/General%20Documents/RFI%20Docs/Dec2019/USA%20RFI%202.pdf?ver=2019-11-25-135925-723>.

⁷ Nina Kollars and Emma Moore, "Every Marine a Blue-Haired Quasi-Rifleperson?" *War on the Rocks*, August 21, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/08/every-marine-a-blue-haired-quasi-rifleperson/>.

⁸ Emma Moore, "What The US Army Should Learn From the British Army's Punchy Recruiting Campaign," *Task & Purpose*, January 30, 2019, <https://taskandpurpose.com/us-army-british-army-recruiting-campaigns>.

⁹ Elsa Kania and Emma Moore, "Great Power Rivalry Is Also a War For Talent," *Defense One*, May 19, 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/05/great-power-rivalry-also-war-talent/157103/>. Emma Moore, "The Army may have hit this year's recruiting goal, but the service still has a long way to go," *Task and Purpose*, October 1, 2019, <https://taskandpurpose.com/army-recruiting-problems>.