

October 21, 2009**OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR****Women at War****By PAULA BROADWELL**

One ill-informed social norm that has stymied U.S. effectiveness in counterinsurgency operations relates to the efficacy of having female military personnel serving on the frontline. While many women in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown their ability to use force, one particular group exemplifies how women are essential to winning local hearts and minds. The apparent success of the Marine Corps Female Engagement Teams, or F.E.T.'s — first established last February in Afghanistan — illustrates that the odds of success significantly improve when we use these forces to establish bonds with the other half of Afghanistan's population — its women.

The F.E.T. units are comprised of female marines with various operational specialties who conduct liaison work with Afghan women in remote villages. Their assignments range from searching women at checkpoints to running medical clinics to their core mission of engaging rural Pashtun women, often in their homes.

According to a September Marine Corps After Action Review, the teams have been most effective when Afghans perceive their intent as one of establishing a relationship of mutual trust and interest, rather than one of gathering intelligence. They often are welcomed into village homes while dressed in military drab and headscarves. Afghans purportedly view these American women as a “third gender” — female marines are extended the respect shown to men, but granted the access reserved for women. This access has shown the Americans that indigenous women wield significant influence with their husbands, brothers and, especially, their adolescent sons. The presence of F.E.T.'s sends a strong signal of peaceful engagement to local villages. As one village elder put it, “Your men come to fight, but we know the women are here to help.”

Employing women directly on the front lines in this manner may be critical to meeting our objectives. However, significant impediments inhibit the engagement teams from having a broader impact: The Defense Department's ground combat policy that excludes women, the ad hoc nature of the teams, and the readiness and quantity of available female troops and qualified Pashto linguists.

The Defense Department's most recent version of the “ground combat exclusion policy,” established in 1994, states: “Service members are eligible to be assigned to all positions for which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground.” The policy goes on to define “direct combat” as “engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with hostile force's personnel.

“Direct ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, and shock effect.”

However, the persistent threat of counterinsurgencies combined with evidence of women's proven effectiveness in such situations serve as powerful reasons for updating the law.

The U.S. military's Central Command recently published a "Memorandum of Law Concerning Women in Combat Support Operations." It explicitly condones the use of the F.E.T.'s. The Defense Department's general counsel is scheduled to consider the matter in the near future.

For now, these F.E.T. initiatives are confined to the Marines and there are relatively few women available for these jobs — only 6 percent of Marine Corps personnel are women. Moreover, given the ad hoc nature of the teams — F.E.T. members have "day jobs," serving as logisticians or intelligence officers or in other vital positions — their commanders are often understandably reticent to give up an individual for an additional duty.

While their efforts pay high yields for the military, the missions are hazardous: F.E.T. convoys have been the target of I.E.D.'s and enemy rifle fire. To prepare for such missions, female marines must find time to pursue supplemental training — in immediate action drills, search techniques and cultural nuances — beyond their own operational specialty. Fortunately, the success of the peaceful engagement teams has created incentives to establish improved training for team members, although the dearth of women Pashto translators remains a critical problem.

The success of the F.E.T. initiative illustrates how the Marine Corps is adapting to the counterinsurgency threat in an innovative way. Now it is time for Defense Department to adapt its regulations as well.

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