



Fighting for a Seat at the Table: Women's Military Service and Political Representation

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SPECIAL COLLECTION:
WOMEN OF THE IRAQ
WAR

RESEARCH

 VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

Military service has long been seen as a path to political leadership and elevation of status in public life. Public opinion polls steadily show that the American people trust military veterans to be principled leaders and model public citizens. Combat veterans are held in particularly high regard as model and trustworthy citizens. For military women in the United States, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have ushered in a new era in combat arms participation. However, to the detriment of both women's political and economic equality, gendered perceptions about military participation and the identity of combat veterans have been slow to change. Despite women's participation in combat, they have been denied the elevated citizen status frequently enjoyed by their male peers with similar experiences. This bodes poorly for lasting peace and security. Research increasingly indicates that the involvement of women in public life leads to more peaceful and stable outcomes, and enduring peace and stability. While the US has been a leader in the adoption of official UN Resolutions that call for women's equality in all facets of governance and the passage of the 2017 Women, Peace, and Security Act; women are still heavily under-represented in all levels of government.

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KEYWORDS:

Women; Iraq; Military; Political
Representation; Elections

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Best, R. H., Hunter, K., &
Thomas, K. H. (2021). Fighting
for a Seat at the Table:
Women's Military Service
and Political Representation.
Journal of Veterans Studies,
7(2), pp. 19–33. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.21061/jvs.v7i2.266](https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i2.266)

The perception that women do not serve in the military or, when they do serve, are not in combat, has cost women veterans the credibility to engage in government in the same way as their male peers (Hunter & Best, 2020). There are two routes to changing this, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The first route is to push for a fundamental change to the system that privileges military service as a criterion of full citizenship (see Reardon, 1985). The second, arguably more feasible route, is to change the perception that women do not fight and sacrifice for their countries: that is, to increase the visibility of women in the military and women veterans. This second option is the focus of this paper. In what follows, we develop the argument that women's continued underrepresentation in government is in part because they are not viewed as agents who are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country. Part of the reason that women's military service is not fully recognized is because women veterans face distinct reintegration challenges, which neither American society nor the United States government and military structure have fully addressed, despite increasing calls to do so. This further undermines women's identity as citizen soldiers. Overlooked by society, veteran women become less inclined to self-identify as veterans and, therefore, less likely to take advantage of the privileges of their veteran status. We argue that this process of gendered reintegration forms a self-reinforcing cycle wherein women servicemembers transition into invisible veterans (Thomas & Hunter, 2019). The result is women veterans being underrepresented in public life.

However, evidence suggests that women's participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have begun to break this cycle. Our survey research suggests that women veterans of this era report facing more challenges to their service records. Such challenges are associated with an increased probability that they engage publicly in civic life by giving speeches or running for office. Therefore, while we argue that historically the absence of public recognition for the service of women veterans decreases their electoral prospects, we also find that same lack of recognition is producing a backlash in response to which some veteran women are acting to increase the visibility of women in public life, thereby enhancing future electoral prospects for both veteran and non-veteran women.

To explain this phenomenon, we first discuss the process of cognitive-institutional reinforcement, showing how the institutions created to reintegrate veterans into society are both based on and perpetuate perceptions of women as noncombatants. Cognitive institutions emphasize social identities and establish the norms of behavior associated with those identities. These institutional pressures relate to the beliefs and values of individuals within society. While

cognitive institutional reinforcement of gender roles for former female combatants occurs in societies around the world, and affects both women veterans of state militaries through official veterans' reintegration services and veterans' service organizations, as well as former rebel combatants through gendered reintegration programs (Hunter & Best, 2020), in this article we focus on military veterans.

Because of the gendered assumptions surrounding veterans' reintegration, women veterans have often felt pressured to assume either a traditionally feminine, and often private, identity that mutes their contributions to post-conflict public life or conform to a masculine identity that enables recognition of their contributions, while diminishing their identity as women and their ability to connect with and be seen as representative of women (Herbert, 2000; Higate, 2002). Women veterans who embrace their veteran identity risk being viewed as too masculine, but not accepting a masculine identity is made difficult because women who do not embrace their veteran status become "invisible" as veterans (Thomas et al., 2017a).¹ Due to this forced binary, while women serve in the armed forces and in combat, perceptions about women's service have been slow to change. As a result, the social, political, and economic equality of all women, but especially female combatants, is compromised. Notably, we are not arguing that a "veteran's benefit" of service attaches to veterans running for office, but rather that there is a benefit of being seen as a past or potential defender of the state that attaches specifically to men, regardless of whether they have served in the military, and does not generally attach to women, even those who have served.

However, in the Post-9/11 period, the visibility of veteran women has increased at least marginally, due in large part to the stories of women's experiences in combat prior to the lifting of the ban on women in ground combat: those of Tammy Duckworth, Amy McGrath, and Ashley White. The removal of the ban, subsequent media coverage of the first women to graduate Ranger school, and women's official entry into ground combat have further enhanced the visibility of veteran women and especially those who serve in combat. Meanwhile, as women's share of the veteran population has increased and women combat veterans have returned from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has worked to better address the needs of women veterans. The share of these women using VA services has drastically increased. As of 2008, 36% of veteran women used VA services as compared to 39% of veteran men. By 2017, that figure was 50% for veteran women, one percentage point higher than for veteran men.²

Our research not only explains women's exclusion from public socioeconomic engagement and government,

particularly at the national level, but suggests a path forward based on the experiences of women who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. We developed a case study of reintegration and attitudes about participation in public life in the United States using original survey data of veterans of the United States armed forces. The United States' status as a hegemon for much of the last century, coupled with the absence of compulsory service since the Vietnam War and the widening civil-military gap, mean that its military, veterans' institutions, and perceptions of veterans are significantly different than those of other countries. However, the United States military has produced more than two million veteran women. While the United States does not lead the world in the political representation of women, it does have relatively good gender norms, and women have become prominent leaders in business. Therefore, we can imagine that, if the United States is failing veteran women through gendered reintegration, so too are many other countries. As Hunter and Best (2020) argue, the failure to adequately acknowledge the service of women combatants and reintegrate them into civilian life as veterans costs their societies the many benefits associated with women's full incorporation into governance and peace processes.

THE VALUE OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES

Research on women in government has suggested that having more women or more gender diversity in government leads to more peaceful and stable outcomes, more consensus-based policy making, and general advancement of women's status in society (Anderlini, 2007; Gizelis, 2009; O'Reilly et al., 2015). Higher proportions of female legislators are associated with lower likelihoods of internal conflict (Melander, 2005a), civil war reoccurrence (Demeritt et al., 2014; Shair-Rosenfield & Wood, 2017), state repression (Melander, 2005b), and international conflict involvement. Greater legislative gender diversity is associated with a greater probability of peaceful resolution to civil conflict (Best et al., 2018), greater durability of peace agreements (Shair-Rosenfield & Wood, 2017), and both a longer history of women's suffrage and a higher percentage of women in parliament is associated with a lower likelihood of a state using military violence to resolve interstate disputes (Caprioli, 2000). Female executives are less likely than their male counterparts to use executive decrees and more likely to favor consensus-building politics, even when controlling for the executive's popularity. Despite the many positive effects of women in government, and stated focus on women's rights and

empowerment, women's political representation still lags both internationally and in the United States.³

It is not just when women are in chief positions of power that positive outcomes have been recorded. The benefits are seen at all levels of government. Women bring new perspectives, may be more inclined to consider the positions of the oppressed, are considered more trustworthy and more cooperative, and may be more inclined to work cooperatively toward solving problems (Anderlini, 2007). Experimental evidence suggests that both women-only and mixed gender groups behave more cooperatively, fairly, and reciprocally than groups of only men (Eckel et al., 2008). Further, female legislators may be more inclined to devote resources toward areas that enhance social welfare and human rights.⁴ This suggests that, particularly in politically tense times, having more women legislators may be helpful for diffusing discord both internally and externally with allies and adversaries alike.

Psychological studies have found minimal innate gender differences in individual aggression and leadership style (Carothers & Reis, 2013). Meanwhile, research in political science increasingly indicates that societal gender equality produces more cooperative and peaceful outcomes. Caprioli (2003) found that states with greater gender equality use lower levels of violence in their international crises. Similarly, Regan and Paskeviciute (2003) have found a relationship between lower birth rates, an oft used indicator of women's equality, and lower levels of interstate violence. Caprioli (2003) and Melander (2005a) discovered a negative relationship between gender equality and the likelihood of intrastate conflict decreases, and Melander (2005b) found that gender equality is positively related to respect for physical integrity rights. Hudson et al. (2012) identified a pacifying effect of women's social and political equality more broadly. This is only a sampling, but overwhelmingly, the literature has suggested many positive effects of increases in respect for women's rights and the equality of women. While there are substantial potential benefits of increased representation of women, it is generally only within less developed countries and post-conflict states that the international community takes a heavy-handed approach to pushing for greater representation of women. It is often assumed that in the Western world, gender equality is a given. However, this is not the case.

LEVERAGING COMBAT EXPERIENCE IN POLITICAL LIFE

Views about citizenship and who is worthy of ascending to leadership positions pose a barrier to women serving in elected office. Individuals are more likely to be elected

when they are viewed as model citizens and strong leaders who are willing and able to sacrifice for their country. Tying military service, especially combat service, to worthy citizenship presents an obstacle to women achieving greater influence in politics. Hudson et al. (2012) note that the Swiss government's rationale for not granting women suffrage until 1971 was that women did not shed blood for their countries. Likewise, because women have not been seen as fighting on behalf of their countries and have been viewed as having pacifist or anti-war sentiments as well as cross-cutting loyalties with the women of the enemy (or being susceptible to manipulation by men of the opposing side), they can be viewed with suspicion as possible traitors at worst, or at best as holding the interests of women and children above the interests of the state (however these are defined; Tir & Bailey, 2018). If the idea that women do not participate in combat were overcome, an avenue for women to participate in governance more fully could emerge.

American women have participated in combat roles in conflicts ranging from the American Revolution to the recent wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria.⁵ As of 2015, there were no restrictions on women's combat service. Even when there were restrictions on women's service in combat roles, the lines between combat and non-combat roles for deployed troops were often blurred (Thomas & Hunter, 2019). In 1994, well before the United States officially opened the first combat roles to women,⁶ the Secretary of the Army Togo D. West, Jr. stated,

The issue at hand is not one of deciding whether or not women will be "in combat." The nature of the modern battlefield is such that we can expect soldiers throughout the breadth and depth of a theater of war to be potentially in combat.⁷ (qtd. in Harrell et al., 2007, p. 38)

A 2007 RAND study of practices regarding the assignment of women in the United States Army found that in many areas, the Army either fell short of compliance with its own policies or complied with the letter but not the spirit of Department of Defense policies restricting women (Harrell et al. 2007).

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were a primary driver for changing the official policies on women's assignments. After action reports showed that the presence of women in infantry units led to more accurate and effective intelligence gathering and more stable post-conflict societies (Khalili, 2011). Beyond intelligence gathering, women have been essential to combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Harrell et al. (2007) noted, "women [comprise] approximately 10 to 20 percent of Army personnel

deployed to Iraq and [participate] in almost every kind of unit or subunit open to women within [brigade combat teams]" (p. 6). Additionally, women had a unique role on the battlefield. Cultural sensitivities meant that men were unable to engage with local women. Iraq and Afghanistan proved that not only could women be effective in war, but that they were essential for modern combat operations.

Yet, even with stories of women's success in Iraq and Afghanistan highlighted in the American popular press, the common perception of women as being domestic, pacific, or victim remained (Thomas et al., 2016). While only a small minority of women (and men) participate in combat, the perceived dichotomy of non-combatant female victims and combatant men is so pervasive it delegitimizes the involvement of women in combat and leads to misunderstandings of women's agency in their post-conflict roles (Carpenter, 2005). When women's agency during conflict is acknowledged, it is frequently in terms of what they do to stop or prevent war, rather than to win wars. While women have been critical to anti-war campaigns, they have also actively fueled conflict by their military service as well as their support for others who serve and the causes they serve. Men and women both take on diverse roles in war and can be both victim and agent of violence. There have been moves to bring women's violent agency during conflict into both scholarly and practical circles (Herrera & Porch, 2008; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007; Stanski, 2006). However, a 2016 survey of American military women indicated that a primary reintegration challenge reported as service women left a duty status was the absence of public recognition or understanding of their role in combat and therefore the weight of their service (Thomas et al., 2017b).

COGNITIVE-INSTITUTIONAL REINFORCEMENT AND WOMEN'S UNDERREPRESENTATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

Cognitive-institutional reinforcement can be used to explain why, despite their military service, women continue to lack the same sociopolitical status of men. Cognitive-institutional reinforcement describes the process by which public institutions both reflect the social norms and culture of the societies that create them and reinforce, reproduce, and protect those norms.⁸ The appeal to social norms is what allows institutions to endure. The public face of violence has long been a space occupied by men (Elshtain, 1981), and institutions of violence reinforce traditional gender roles (Higate, 2002). As Louise Chappell (2006) has argued, one cannot understand a society's political institutions without first understanding the

culturally specific gender-based power dynamics that underlay them. Furthermore, because acts of violence are frequently the bedrock of social constructions of gender, institutions of political violence are especially equipped to reinforce gendered norms (Kronsell, 2005). Even when the importance of women during the conduct of war is acknowledged, their roles and experiences are often a foil against the violence conducted by men (Enloe, 2004). The institutions that de-mobilize individuals post-conflict have been created via this same framework of traditional gender roles. Therefore, despite their participation as soldiers, women are reintegrated into society as “women,” while their male counterparts are reintegrated as veterans (Thomas & Hunter, 2019).

Institutions of veteran reintegration (including the VA and nongovernmental veterans’ service organizations [VSO]) are informed by the traditional gender roles of the surrounding society and act as a filter (or prism) to reinforce those norms. Traditional gendered expectations shape societal expectations about who is a veteran, and, in turn, these expectations inform both the formal institutions of reintegration and social practices around veteran identity (such as who receives veterans’ benefits at restaurants and who is acknowledged and thanked for their service). Though men and women may both engage in combat, they return to civilian society via institutions in which men and women experience drastically different outcomes. While male veterans are unlikely to have their service-records challenged and are welcomed at local VSOs, research has shown that women veterans may be questioned about their eligibility for everything from VA health care to reserved parking spaces for veterans (Thomas et al., 2017a).⁹ Further, combat often results in changes to gendered norms of those who participate in it (Handrahan, 2004; Suter et al., 2006). In addition to being denied full recognition as a veteran, women who have internalized aspects of military bearing and assertiveness also risk being shunned or ostracized for not meeting the gendered expectations for feminine behavior (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015). Therefore, some women veterans may feel pressured to hide aspects of their service or its effect on their lives, making women less visible as veterans (Thomas et al., 2017b).

In interviews with 20 female veterans, Burkhart and Hogan (2015) identified hiding one’s military experience as an important coping strategy for women veterans transitioning back to civilian life and facing the stress of meeting civilian expectations for women (p. 120). Even when women veterans do not hide their military careers, they may still be pressured to hide their combat service. In one example, a staff sergeant was reportedly advised to change her answers on a medical questionnaire because

she “could not have experienced combat” (MacKenzie, 2015; also see Evans et al. 2019, p. 14).

GENDERED VETERANS’ REINTEGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

As in many other countries, the service agencies meant to help veterans reintegrate are designed with men in mind. This is seen explicitly in the VA’s codified purpose, which is to “care for *him* who shall have borne the battle” (emphasis added).¹⁰ This highlights that, despite the increasing numbers of women military veterans, the expectation is still that veterans are men. The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) found that the use of a single-gender pronoun (in this case “men”) caused confusion to transitioning service women as to what type of care they were eligible for.¹¹ “Care” in this instance, refers to far more than physical medical care, though Senator Tammy Duckworth’s observation that when she lost her legs in combat in 2004, the care kit she received from Walter Reed Medical Center included a shaving kit and men’s jockey shorts is telling.¹² The institutions of reintegration have been slow to adapt to the reality of women’s military service, both in combat and non-combat roles. Ideas about who can, should, and does serve became crystallized as reintegration institutions were designed around them. These institutions, in turn, reinforced the ideas about who serves that influenced their own creation. They did this both by making women servicemembers and veterans feel as though they did not belong and by establishing protocols that reinforced the views of others engaging in reintegration, either as male veterans, facilitators, or civilian communities, that women do not serve.

The VA is, in many cases, the gatekeeper between military service and civilian life. It provides educational and vocational benefits, as well as a connection between generations of veterans. In addition to the VA, VSOs such as the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America provide support to veterans transitioning from military into civilian life. Skocpol (1992) has shed light on the origins of the gendered nature of veterans’ reintegration. Dating back to the Civil War era, public provisions for men were closely tied to military service, while women’s provisions were tied to “motherhood.” These ties reinforced the cognitive gender stereotypes of the publicly violent man and the private, nurturing women. It is out of this system of post-Civil War pensions and educational benefits that the modern-day VA was born. The VA emerged at a time when women were still largely excluded from formal military service.¹³ Therefore, as it grew, its facilities and programs were designed for male veterans. From the available medical services to the vocational and educational programs, the VA has focused

on men and their needs. Even into the 21st century, when women have been an increasing part of the military, the cognitive notion of the male soldier still informs the way the VA as an institution operates and, in turn, how women are perceived in public life.

Recent surveys find women veterans do not believe they receive the same level of care or the same opportunities for participation in reintegration programs as their male counterparts (Thomas et al., 2017a; Washington, 2007). Women veterans reported that the VA is unable or unwilling to meet their needs, or treats them like spouses or dependents, rather than as service members. In our own survey of veterans, more than half of women veterans, and nearly a third of male veterans disagreed with the statement, “The Department of Veterans Affairs meets the medical needs of female and male service members equally.” Women in our survey also reported feeling that VA employees treated them with less respect than other veterans at nearly four times the rate of men (see [Table 2](#)). A recent RAND study of military sexual trauma estimated that active-duty service women were nearly five times as likely to have experienced sexual assault within the prior year as were their male counterparts. The report finds that of the women who reported unwanted sexual contact to military authorities, 62% experienced either personal or professional retaliation (NDRI, 2014).¹⁴ These findings suggest that the experiences of women veterans while in the military have been, in some respects, markedly different from those of their male counterparts, such that women may have different psychological and physiological needs. Because the VA has historically been oriented towards men, it has struggled in recent decades to adapt to serve women’s needs, leaving women less inclined to view the VA or other military-linked institutions as willing to help them. Utilization figures from the VA indicate that the administration has made major strides toward inclusion, seeing increases in usage among both genders, but larger increases among women mean that women veterans are now slightly more likely to use VA services as compared to men. Some of this gender difference may be due to women’s more frequent usage of health care in general. However, in a study of gender’s impact on health care

seeking behaviors, researchers found that consultation rates in men and women who had comparable underlying morbidities (as assessed by receipt of medication) were similar; men in receipt of antidepressant medication were only 8% less likely to consult than women in receipt of antidepressant medication (Wang et al., 2013). Though usage is up, this suggests that those most in need may still be slipping through the cracks. Historic exclusion from VA services, and the lack of utilization of services beyond health care, has had both physical and socio-economic impacts for women veterans.

In recent years, women veterans have been more likely to suffer the effects of depression and chronic illness than their male counterparts, due in part to the fact that they were less likely to seek and/or receive care from the VA (Thomas et al., 2015). While male veterans are 19% more likely to commit suicide than non-veteran men, female veterans are 250% more likely to commit suicide than other women (VA, 2015). Female veterans are also 1.86 times as likely to be divorced as non-veteran women (the difference is greatest for younger cohorts; of women aged 17–24, veterans are 13 times as likely to be divorced; VA, 2015). Additionally, female veterans often suffer from socio-economic inequities. Data indicate that women veterans are less likely than other women to live in poverty. However, they are far more likely than are male veterans to live in poverty, be homeless, have no income, or be un- or under-employed, despite their common military background and selection into and acceptance by the military (VA, 2015).¹⁵ In a study of veteran women in the workforce, participants indicated that they had experienced gender discrimination in applying for jobs in male-dominated fields consistent with their military occupational specialty (MOS) and that veteran women face more negative repercussions than do men for maintaining a more militaristic demeanor in the civilian work place (Thom & Bassuk 2012, p. 19).

The social ties formed at the VA and in other VSOs often provide the springboard for veterans to engage in public life. Association and identification as a veteran have helped many veterans engage in politics or other public service. Indeed, female veterans are more likely to serve in Congress than other women. However, in recent years,

	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	TOTAL
Female	10	43	21	15	8	97 (58.43%)
Male	8	20	17	11	12	68 (40.96%)
Other	0	1	0	0	0	1 (0.60%)
Total	18 10.84%	64 38.55%	38 22.89%	26 15.66%	20 12.05%	166 (100%)

Table 1 Survey Respondents by Sex and Age.

their representation as a proportion of their share of the adult population is comparable to that of nonveteran men, but less than that of male veterans.¹⁶ One explanation for these outcomes can be traced to women's lack of participation in and involvement with VSOs (Thomas et al., 2017a).¹⁷ Though there is limited research on the topic, there is early evidence that involvement with a VSO heightens identity – both in terms of self-identification and identification by others—as a veteran (Iverson & Anderson, 2013). Having both an internal and external validation for veteran identity heightens the ability of veterans to gain public citizenship benefits of military service. The purpose of the present study is to explore questions of women veteran's representation and inclusion and to assess their impact on political participation by women who served in the military of the United States.

METHODS

We used data from an original survey of veterans to evaluate the effect of gender on the reintegration experience and the effect of gendered reintegration experiences on men and women.¹⁸ The survey was developed by a team of interdisciplinary researchers, two of whom are also women veterans. The research and survey instrument were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Denver. The survey was deployed via Qualtrics between March and June 2018 and was disseminated over social media with the assistance of veterans' service organizations (VSOs) such as Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and the Service Women's Action Network. To enable analysis of gendered effects, we significantly oversampled women. To compensate for this overrepresentation relative to the male and female veteran populations, we weighted male respondents at 2.15 times and female respondents at 0.23 times in all logistic analyses. Veterans over 60 years

of age were underrepresented in our sample. About 76% (77% of female respondents) of our respondents were enlisted, about 17.5% (16.5% of female respondents) were officers, and the remainder were both. Each age group had representation of both male and female officers and enlisted. We excluded the lone "Other" respondent from the analyses and weighted the remaining categories in accordance with the true population of veterans in that category. A breakdown of these veterans by age and sex is shown in **Table 1**. Because we relied on VSOs to help distribute the survey, our respondents are more likely than the average veteran to be members of VSOs.

To evaluate the gendered differences in societal responses to veterans, we used survey items capturing whether respondents report experiencing any of the following: (a) having others diminish their military service, (b) having others dismiss or deny their combat service, (c) having others comment that they do not look like a veteran, (d) having members or representatives of a VSO or (e) employees of the VA direct them toward spousal services when they sought services as veterans, (f) having civilians in a non-military context, or (g) employees of the VA, or (h) members or representatives of a VSO accuse them of unfairly claiming military or veterans benefits, or (i) being accused of lying about their military service. **Table 2** reports a summary of responses on these items disaggregated by sex. Regression modeling was used to explore predictor variables' impact on each of the survey response items.

RESULTS

The results indicate that gender is a powerful predictor of challenges in the service or reintegration environment. Model 1, reported in **Table 3**, is a weighted logistic regression analysis of the effects of gender, age, officer

	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE-MALE GAP
Disagree that the VA treats men and women equally (<i>n</i> = 168)	51 51.52%	22 31.88%	29 19.64%
The VA treats me with less respect than other veterans (<i>n</i> = 118)	18 25.35%	3 6.38%	15 18.97%
Have considered running for any elected office (<i>n</i> = 168)	27 27.27%	31 44.93%	-4 -17.66%
Agree that VSOs are oriented toward male veterans (<i>n</i> = 167)	70 70.71%	34 50%	36 20.71%
Experienced at least one of 9 types of challenge to veteran (<i>n</i> = 165)	90 90.91%	36 54.55%	54 36.36%

Table 2 Gendered Differences in Attitudes.

	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	MODEL 3	MODEL 4	MODEL 5
	CHALLENGED	CONSIDER RUNNING		POLITICAL ACTIVITY	
Female	2.40*** (0.54)	-0.74+ (0.45)	-1.16* (0.51)	-0.22 (0.18)	-0.44* (0.18)
Age	-0.18 (0.24)	-0.51+ (0.27)	-0.48+ (0.26)	0.07 (0.09)	0.10 (0.09)
Officer	0.10 (0.61)	1.41* (0.61)	1.44* (0.63)	0.43+ (0.25)	0.42* (0.22)
Combat	0.43 (0.55)	-0.23 (0.58)	-0.36 (0.59)	-0.06 (0.23)	-0.11 (0.22)
Challenged			1.06+ (0.61)		0.67** (0.24)
Constant	0.29 (0.79)	0.54 (0.79)	-0.05 (0.96)	0.09 (0.37)	-0.38 (0.42)
lnalpha					
Constant				-1.58+ (0.89)	-2.56 (2.07)
N	121	121	121	121	121
R ²					

Table 3 Effects of Gender on Challenges and Political Engagement.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

$p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

status, and combat experience on account of the types of experiences a respondent reported.¹⁹ While there are nine types of experiences listed above, the mean is 1.15, and the standard deviation is 1.18. Because the mean count of reported challenges is close to one, we created the dichotomous variable “challenged” to capture whether a respondent reported experiencing at least one of the challenges listed above. “Female,” “officer,” and “combat” are dummy variables coded 1 if the respondent identified as female, served as an officer,²⁰ or experienced combat, respectively, and 0 if the respondent identified as male, was enlisted, or had no combat experience. “Age” is coded as 20–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, and >60 years. Model 1 indicates that being a woman significantly increases the probability that a respondent reported having their service challenged. This effect is graphed in **Figure 1**. None of the other variables in the model were significant.

In Model 2, we report a weighted logistic regression of the same independent variables we used in Model 1 on whether a respondent reported having considered running for office. In this model, the variables female and age were both negative and marginally significant, while officer was positive and significant. However, when we add “challenged” as an independent variable in Model 3, female became significant at $p = 0.024$, while

“challenged” was positive and marginally significant. This suggests that while women veterans are generally less likely to consider running for office, having one’s service challenged, an experience that veteran women in our sample were far more likely to report as compared to veteran men, they are also more likely to have their service challenged, which is associated with increased interest in running.²¹ **Figure 2** graphs the effect of sex and age on the probability a respondent reports having considered running for office.

For Models 4 and 5, we used a measure of political activity as our dependent variable. This measure was a count constructed of five types of political activity that veterans may report engaging in: (a) gave speeches or interviews or wrote op-eds related to one’s veteran status, (b) considered running for political office, (c) considered running for other elected positions, (d) held an elected office, or (e) run for and lost an elected office. “Political activity” consists of values ranging from 0 to 5, has a mean equal to 1.07, and has a standard deviation equal to 1.33. Because the “political activity” variable is a count, Models 4 and 5 are negative binomial regressions: Model 4 without “challenged” and Model 5 with “challenged.”

Only “officer” was significant in Model 4. Again, when we included “challenged,” the coefficient on female becomes

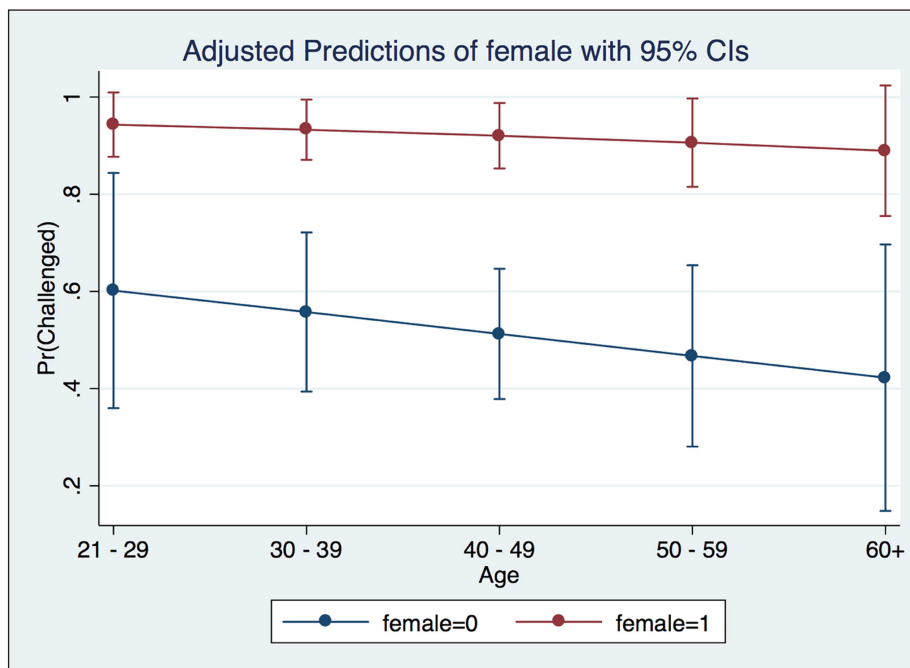


Figure 1 Effect of Gender Identity on Likelihood of Challenge to Veteran Status.

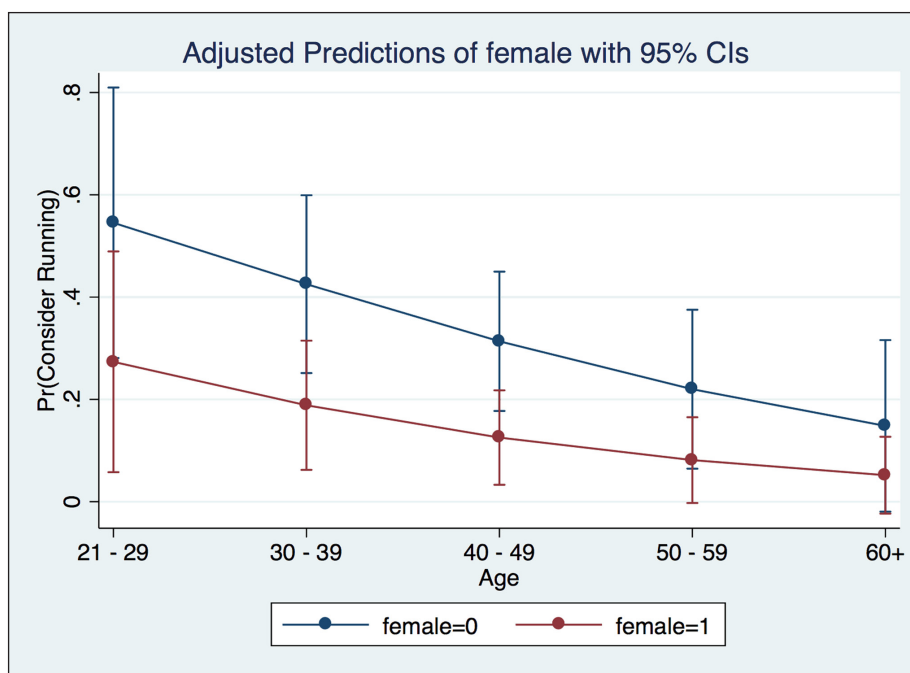


Figure 2 Effect of Gender Identity and Age on Likelihood of a Veteran to Run for Office.

significant and negative. The effect of sex on the predicted number of political activity types is graphed by age in **Figure 3**. Our results indicate that women veterans are less likely in general to engage in political activities of the sort measured here, and they are more likely to be challenged or experience microaggressions, such as being told they do not look like a veteran. These negative experiences, however, increase the chances of an individual engaging in politics.

These findings both confirm that cognitive-institutional reinforcement is present in the US veteran's reintegration process and provide a puzzle. Historically, the social challenge to veteran status has resulted in women remaining outside the political sphere. Yet for women veterans of the Iraq and Afghan wars, the challenging nature of their veteran status seems to drive women into public life.

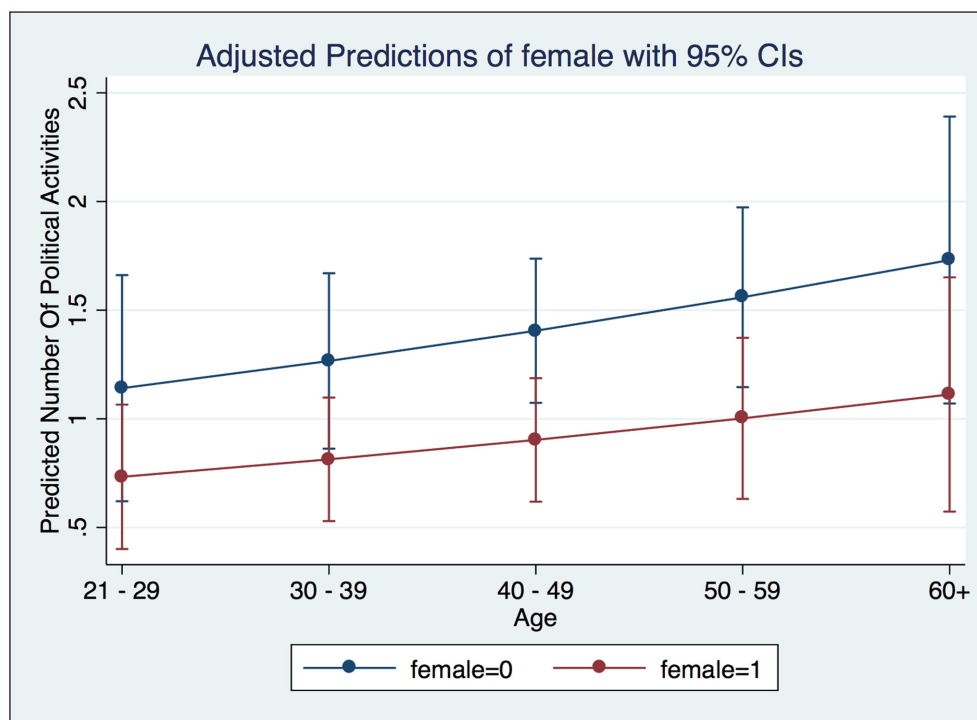


Figure 3 Effect of Gender Identity and Age on Likelihood of Engagement in Political Activities.

DISCUSSION

The trend whereby we see increased numbers of OIF/OEF veteran women running for office while simultaneously self-reporting an obstacle-filled service environment is seen at the national level. In 2018, a record number of women veterans ran for congress (14) and won seats at a higher rate than their male counterparts. Non-incumbent women veterans won at a rate of 30%, while non-incumbent male veterans won at a rate of 17%. Notably, the women veterans running for both House and Senate seats put their veteran identity front and center. Mikie Sherrill, Chrissie Hoolahan, Martha McSally, MJ Hegar, and Amy McGrath all frequently appear wearing their flight jackets in political ads and highlight their military accomplishments as the backbone of their campaigns. Indeed, several high-profile campaigns have also highlighted the challenges a candidate faced either as a woman in the military or a woman seeking to serve in the military. Prominent examples include the campaigns of Martha McSally and MJ Hegar, both of which centered law suits the candidates had brought against the Department of Defense for discriminatory policies. The campaign of Amy McGrath targeted Senator Mitch McConnell's apparent support for policies that excluded women from air combat.

The 2020 elections saw a doubling of women veterans running for Congressional office, with 28 total running either for re-election or challenging long-standing incumbents.

Additionally, Tulsi Gabbard's run for the 2020 Democratic Presidential nomination marks the first time a woman veteran sought the office of the president. Her campaign launch video featured her prominently wearing her Army uniform and included videos of her visiting Arlington National Cemetery. In her ads, she used her military background to address issues of war and peace and the US's involvement in international interventions. Despite the record number of candidates, the number of veteran women in Congress fell from seven to six in the 117th Congress.²²

However, Tulsi Gabbard's run for the presidential nomination and the continued increase in women veterans running for Congress offers another question. The majority of women who run for office run as Democrats. Many of these women who have won—including Mikie Sherrill, Chrissie Hoolahan, and Elaine Luria—did so in districts that had been historically controlled by Republicans. While it is outside the scope of this article to address political considerations or voter behavior, the ability of women veterans to win in places where male Democrats have historically failed raises important questions about the changing perceptions people have of women veterans and the electoral effects of prior military service for women.²³

The publicity that congressional campaigns have received on a national level is beginning to break the perception that women do not sacrifice for their country. The willingness of women veterans to push against, rather than accept, the consequences of a reintegration system that expects

them to downplay their sacrifices is an important step in elevating the public perception of women as full citizens.

Additionally, the 2013 removal of the women-in-combat exclusion may be playing a role in changing both personal and public perception of women's veteran status and their acceptance as full citizens. Though none of the women who have run for office served in direct ground combat roles, they all ran at a time when women could be in these positions. From Tammy Duckworth's 2006 campaign for the US House to MJ Hegar's 2018 campaign to unseat Republican John Carter in Texas's 31st Congressional district, veteran women have been upending Americans' ideas about women and combat service by highlighting their involvement in air combat, where both earned Purple Hearts after being shot down. The removal of the ground combat ban was widely covered in the popular press—from the first women graduating from the elite Army Ranger training to the Marines enlisting their first woman in the infantry. Coverage of these events was common in outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Publicity of these events and the fact that for the past two election cycles women veterans have not shied away from their service, provides an opportunity for more women to be seen as willing and able to sacrifice for their country.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, because society does not envision women as veterans or veterans as women, female veterans are pressured to hide their service, perpetuating the myth that women do not serve. It is this perception that veterans are men that shapes the reintegration experience that fails to fully appreciate women's service or respond to their needs as veterans. It is important to note that this is not necessarily or entirely the result of a bias against the idea of women serving in the military or even in combat. Rather, that institutions of reintegration fail to fully address the needs or existence of veteran women is the result of an implicit bias. The invisibility of women's service means that, despite women's participation in combat, they are denied the elevated citizen status frequently enjoyed by their male counterparts. This helps explain the lack of women in government.

Women veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan pushing back against the cognitive-institutional reinforcement present in reintegration systems has both empirical and practical implications for policy and scholarly communities. In the policy world, it provides a lens through which institutions of reintegration can self-evaluate to better serve women veterans. The model of cognitive-institutional reinforcement is based largely on women veterans reintegrating through

formal channels. Currently, the VA is grappling with how to better serve women as the fastest growing population of US veterans. Currently, only 40% of women veterans utilize services from the VA, a number indicative of a system where women do not feel well served. Additionally, as Congress has attempted to push for structural reforms to address the needs of women veterans, the VA remains plagued with problems of sexual assault, harassment, and being generally unwelcoming to women.²⁴ VSOs are similarly grappling with their ability to attract women and serve them in a meaningful way (Thomas & Hunter, 2019). These organizations must look inward as to how they can break the cycle of cognitive-institutional reinforcement and promote, rather than hinder, the sacrifices that women have made.

There is no question that women veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan had combat experiences worthy of being seen as sacrificing for their country. Women veterans clearly know this, as they are pushing back against challenges to their service through more public engagement. However, it should not be up to the individual woman to justify her service as worthy of public engagement. As gatekeepers to veterans' public participation, these institutions have an opportunity to promote women's service and change the perception of the sacrifices women have made.

From a scholarly perspective, questions arise as to why the current generation of women veterans have been willing to openly push back against the impact of institutions that try to erase their service. More research is needed to understand what aspects of their experiences resulted in the willingness to engage in public life even when their service was questioned. Understanding this has implications for the study of women in public life generally. Though research shows that there are benefits of women's leadership, there remains little work on the pathways to attain these positions. The ability of this group to overcome the historic stickiness of traditional gender norms will contribute to an understanding of how women more broadly can attain a broader part of public life.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study. As noted earlier, because we relied on VSOs to help distribute the survey, it is likely that our respondents are more likely than the average veteran to be members of VSOs. Additionally, veterans over 60 years of age are significantly underrepresented in our data. Convenience sampling also delimits the survey sample to veterans not incarcerated or institutionalized. Another significant limitation of the study is that it is impossible to discern whether having one's service challenged makes one more likely to engage in politics or whether being politically inclined or engaged makes one

more cognizant of challenges. While our results provide strong support for a connection between the two, we are unable to demonstrate the direction of causality without a longitudinal study that tracks change in attitudes toward political engagement and exposure to challenges to one's service over time.

For researchers looking to expand upon the present study, our model will help in evaluating the impact of gender-appropriate²⁵ reintegration programs and services on socio-economic and political outcomes for women, and more peaceful outcomes for their societies. For policymakers, our model suggests that developing these gender appropriate reintegration programs and services may be critical to the resolution of armed conflict, the maintenance of peace, the realization of the benefits of women in government, and the successful and healthful demobilization and reintegration of female combatants.

We highlight how institutions built on the traditional idea of the male soldier may be slow to meet the needs of women. Understanding the needs of women veterans and incorporating them in an appropriate and meaningful way is crucial, as women veterans are a fast-growing population.

At a time when the international community (including the US) has recognized the importance of women's leadership in public life—both politically and in the broader socioeconomic sphere—it is essential that women who risked their lives to serve their country be included in the institutional benefits of service. To further our understanding of how reintegration institutions serve male and women veterans, our future research will involve surveying men and women on their use of VSOs and the VA, to get a clearer picture of the nature and origins of gendered differences in reintegration and ultimately in outcomes for veterans' civic engagement, health, and socio-economic status.

We anticipate that gender-appropriate institutions of reintegration will lead to an eventual shift in the content of gender norms and a weakening of traditional gender norms. This shift should, in turn, lead to more positive attitudes toward women in society and in leadership, higher socio-economic status for women, greater gender equality, and more meaningful representation of women in government.

NOTES

1 The term “invisible veterans” has been adopted by both the Department of Veterans' Affairs Women's Programs and women's veterans' advocacy groups to draw attention to the number of women veterans that exist yet are largely excluded from both formal and informal programs.

2 Utilization rates available at https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/Quickfacts/VA_Utilization_Profile_2017.pdf.

- 3 See chapter 8 of Paxton and Hughes (2015) for a more thorough review of the ways in which having women in government can produce different outcomes.
- 4 Findings from Taylor-Robinson and Heath (2003) support a greater priority on women's rights, but do not find a significant difference in the degree to which male and female legislators in Honduras prioritize children and family issues.
- 5 For a breakdown of the participation of women in military operations see the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives' Annual Report.
- 6 President Bill Clinton ordered the Pentagon to open combat aviation roles to women in April 1993.
- 7 Togo D. West, Jr., Secretary of the Army, “Increasing Opportunities for Women in the Army,” memorandum to the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness, July 27, 1994. Qtd in Harrell et al., 2007.
- 8 Institutions can also affect the evolution of social norms. As we discuss below, change in the institutions of reintegration of female combatants may lead to an eventual shift in the content of gender norms and a weakening of traditional gender norms.
- 9 See Maples (2017) <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/the-inconvenience-of-being-a-woman-veteran/545987/>; and Goldstein (2017) <https://taskandpurpose.com/5-things-women-veterans-want-everyone-know/>.
- 10 From the Department of Veterans' Affairs mission statement at https://www.va.gov/about_va/mission.asp.
- 11 DACOWITS Recommendations to the Secretary of Defense, 2018. Available at <https://dacowits.defense.gov/Portals/48/Documents/Reports/2018/Annual%20Report/DACOWITS%20Annual%20Report%202018.pdf?ver=2019-03-11-115325-640>.
- 12 O'Toole (2017) https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/14/women-at-war-unseen_n_1498291.html.
- 13 For a timeline of VA events, see: VA History in Brief at https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/archives/docs/history_in_brief.pdf.
- 14 The frequency of retaliation against men could not be estimated.
- 15 The VA collects raw data on veterans' socio-economic outcomes; however, these are not widely available. We can use reports to compare outcomes among female veterans to other women and to compare veterans to non-veterans. However, it is often difficult to adequately compare the outcomes of female veterans to those of male veterans.
- 16 The population of female veterans in the United States was equal to about 1.6 million in 2014. At the same time the estimated adult population was 244,737,285, based on the 2010 census, approximately 48.9% of these, or 119.7 million were men, and of those about 14.8%, or 17.7 million, were veterans. This leaves an estimated 102 million nonveteran men. In the 114th Congress, elected in 2014, 4 veteran women, 97 veteran men, 334 nonveteran men, and 100 nonveteran women were elected as voting members of Congress. If we look at the ratio of nonveteran men in Congress to those in the US population and evaluate this against the number of veteran women in the population, for women veterans to be represented at the same rate as nonveteran men would require the election of 5 (or 5.24 to be precise) veteran women. To see this difference more starkly, if nonveteran men were represented at the same rate as veteran women in the 114th Congress, we'd expect to see 79 fewer nonveteran men in Congress. For veteran women to be represented as well as veteran men in the 114th Congress, would require the election of 8 or 9 veteran women (8.77). In the 116th Congress, there are 7 veteran women and 319 nonveteran men. Without updated statistics on the number of women veterans in the population, it is impossible to know if veteran women are now slightly better represented than nonveteran men.
- 17 For example, the American Legion is open to current and veteran service members who served during periods of active hostilities. As of 2017, its membership is less than 3% women. By comparison as of 2015, 9.4% of veterans were women and 15.5% of active-duty service members were women.
- 18 A complete copy of the survey instrument as well as replication files are available upon request from the authors.

- 19 We also ran the analysis controlling for whether a respondent identified as “white.” The coefficient was insignificant and the results were substantially the same. We were unable to control for other effects of race or ethnicity due to insufficient variation; 79.29% of respondents identified as “white.”
- 20 The thirteen respondents who reported serving as both enlisted and officer are coded as officers in all analyses.
- 21 These results are robust to the inclusion of a variable interacting *Female and Challenged*, but we did not find an interactive effect.
- 22 <https://www.moa.org/content/publications-and-media/news-articles/2021-news-articles/veterans-in-the-117th-congress,-by-the-numbers/>.
- 23 For early efforts in this direction, see Theresa Schroeder, Rebecca Best, and Jeremy Teigen (2019). “See G.I. Jane Run: The rise of female military veteran candidates for Congress.” Presented at the Inter-University Symposium on Armed Forces and Society, Reston, VA.
- 24 The story of Andrea Goldstein is illustrative of this point. Ms. Goldstein is a Navy veteran and senior staffer for the House Veteran Affairs Committee. While she was working on legislation to address military sexual assault, she was assaulted at the Washington, DC VA. Her story is chronicled in the *New York Times* [Steinhauer, J. (2019, September 26). Woman trying to end sexual assault at VA centers says she is attacked in one].
- 25 We use the term gender appropriate as an alternative to “gender neutral,” a term that has been used in the context of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) agreements with good intentions, but poor results (see Anderlini, 2007; O’Neill & Vary, 2011). “Gender neutral” has been used to refer to DDRs, such as the one in Angola, that do not directly reference women or do not place any restrictions on women. However, it has been noted through the failures of gender neutral agreements that neglecting to mention women, or to mention gender at all, leads to unintended consequences including a lack of representation of the interests of women in negotiations, lack of preparation to enable women to participate in DDR programs when they have other traditional care obligations or familial restrictions on their activities, and lack of attention to the particular gendered ways in which war may affect women (including unwanted pregnancies, sexual abuses that extend beyond the resolution of the conflict as women are forcibly married, local restrictions on the activities of women, biases about women who have engaged in violence, the use of threats or force to prevent women from accessing services, etc.). By gender appropriate, we mean efforts that both actively seek to ensure there is no discrimination against women and proactively include women in ways that account for the preexisting cultural and institutional context. This means that not only should fighters not be referred to using gendered pronouns, but reintegration services should also account for the ways in which the needs and environments of former female combatants differ from those of their male counterparts.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Best, R. H., Hunter, K., & Thomas, K. H. (2021). Fighting for a Seat at the Table: Women's Military Service and Political Representation. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(2), pp. 19–33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i2.266>

Submitted: 01 January 2020 Accepted: 20 May 2021 Published: 27 July 2021

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