



Out of Range

Obstacles to Reproductive and Sexual Health Care in the Military

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Introduction and summary

Women's presence and roles in the military have greatly increased over the past few decades, and the issue of sexual assault continues to be widely covered in the news. One area that receives little attention, however, is how the military falls far short of its obligations when it comes to providing servicewomen with adequate reproductive and sexual health care. The fact is, women in the armed forces fight and die to defend rights they themselves do not completely possess, and they lack access to health services that civilian women routinely use.

Not only is this an injustice to individual servicewomen, but it also impedes the military as a whole. The failure of the nation's civilian and military leaders to provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care undermines military readiness, unit cohesion, and equality in the ranks. For instance, when deployed soldiers cannot prevent or plan their pregnancies, they must interrupt their tours of duty, which can affect their mission. When they are not able to obtain appropriate and timely gynecological care, they may become ill and unfit to serve. Because they are required to seek permission from commanders to leave their units to access abortion care, they may postpone obtaining that care or even turn to clandestine means, both of which increase their health risks. And when they are denied benefits and opportunities afforded to their male counterparts, their status as second-class citizens in what remains a traditionally male culture is reinforced.

This report begins with a brief overview of women's participation in the armed forces, as well as the range of military health benefits available to female members of the military and female veterans. It then discusses the barriers that often inhibit women in the armed forces from getting the care they need, as well as the impact these hurdles have on the success of the U.S. military.

Finally, the report addresses recommendations for policymakers. These suggestions include, but are not limited to, steps geared toward curbing sexual assault rates, increasing access to contraceptives, and lifting bans on abortion care.

The policies and practices that the military must follow related to sexual and reproductive health care are not only unfair and unjust, but they are also costly, inefficient, and counterproductive. At a time when the United States is winding down from two wars, the size of the military is contracting, and the economy is still recovering from a significant recession, the country can ill afford to squander the talent, skills, and commitment of dedicated female soldiers by neglecting their health and well-being. Women have become an integral part of the armed forces, and they should have access to all the health care services that they need.

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