

PM: GI Jane and the Enemy Within

By Polly Mann

Recent legislation authorized women in the military to engage in armed combat. Many of us have been working for change in the opposite direction. Women Against Military Madness had its inception in 1981 when statistics showed that more women than men opposed war and we banded together to try to get our country to give up on war and seek other solutions for international disputes.

The number of females in combat zones is 150,000; 33 percent are African-American and 16.9 percent are Latina. I find it hard to believe that these groups are more pro-war—rather, I believe, they are more in need of jobs. Their unemployment ratios are high—14 percent for African-American women and 9.7 percent for Latina women (among the latter group who enlist, some may do so as a road to citizenship under the Dream Act—especially since paying out-of-state tuition in many states makes the alternative—enrollment in an institution of higher learning—unaffordable). This is why, for many women, enlistment may seem like the only solution.

But Leah Bolger, a national leader in Veterans for Peace, does not see sending women into combat as a good solution. She recently commented: “If our government really wanted to support women, it could send 40 of them to college at \$25,000 a year for the same price it costs to send one of them to fight in Afghanistan ... The grotesque Pentagon budget should be slashed, and that money used for education, health care and jobs programs—that is the real answer for the advancement of women.”

One of the biggest drawbacks for women considering enlistment is the probability of sexual harassment and/or rape. In 2010 alone, the military experienced a staggering 19,000 sex crimes within its ranks. According to Department of Defense statistics, more than one-fifth of all active-duty female soldiers have been sexually assaulted, leaving women who have been raped in the military with a higher rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than that of men in combat.

And the actual rate could be considerably higher. That’s because, to date, only 13.5 percent of all victims—both male and female—actually report incidents of sexual assault at the time they occur. Of the incidents that are reported, less than 10 percent are prosecuted. Today, the occurrence of sexual assault in the U.S. military is almost double that of American civilians.*



The U.S. has now officially designated women as able to serve in combat. This is advancement?

photo: Erik deCastro/Reuters

To make matters worse, only 15 Veteran Affairs centers in the United States provide residential mental-health treatment specifically for women with PTSD. A Military Times poll estimates the PTSD rates for female veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to be about 20 percent. (Various studies of PTSD prevalence among male veterans of those wars has estimated the rate at anywhere from 10 percent to 18 percent.)

Women considering enlistment would find it helpful to first see the documentary, "The Invisible War," which received the Sundance Film Festival Audience Award for Best Documentary (Director: Kirby Dick. Docurama Films. 2012). It is an investigation into the systematic and predatory nature of rape taking place in U.S. military compounds. Among its highly disturbing revelations are that rape is often committed by serial offenders.

But the possibility of falling victim to a sexual crime is not the only danger for women entering the military, aside from the obvious danger of being killed or wounded in combat. At the beginning of this year, it was widely reported in major media that in 2012, the number of active-duty U.S. army soldiers who committed suicide was 177, exceeding the 176 who were killed that year in Afghanistan. Across all branches of service 349 took their own lives, which was also more than died in combat. And, of former military personnel, an astonishing 6,500 killed themselves that year, roughly equivalent to one every 80 minutes.

I cannot imagine ever encouraging a young woman to enter the military, even in a non-combatant status, but if she so chooses, she should look into all the aspects of such a commitment.

* These figures are not limited to women. According to the Service Women's Action Network, 46 percent of the roughly 108,000 veterans who experienced military sexual trauma (MST) in 2010 were men.

Polly Mann is a co-founder of Women Against Military Madness. She has continued as an active member since its founding and writes regularly for this newsletter.