

# At War and at Home: The Consequences of US Women Combat Casualties\*

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## Abstract

What are the consequences of women dying in combat? We study how women fighting on the front lines of the military affects public attitudes toward (1) military conflict and (2) women's equality. We demonstrate through a series of survey experiments that women dying in combat does not reduce public support for war. However, women's combat deaths do shape perceptions of women's equality. Women dying in combat *increases* support for gender equality, particularly in the public sphere of work and politics, but only among women respondents. The findings indicate that women's combat deaths do not undermine leaders' ability to garner support for war, but combat service—and indeed, combat sacrifice—alone is insufficient to yield women's “first-class citizenship” among the general US public. The results highlight how major policy changes challenging traditional conceptions of gender and war can generate positive attitudinal shifts concentrated among members of the underrepresented community.

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# 1 Introduction

The willingness to fight and die in combat is inextricably linked with what it means to be a full and equal citizen of the state (Janowitz 1976; Krebs 2006). Consequently, restrictions on who can serve in the armed forces, and in what capacity, have stoked debates across recent decades and around the globe. In the US, black soldiers confronted limitations on their capacity to serve until the early 1950s, while gay, lesbian, and bisexual soldiers were unable to serve openly until 2010. Combat restrictions on the basis of gender are especially severe—in 2013, fewer than 10% of countries allowed women to serve in front-line combat positions.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps more so than any other domain, the military and battlefield sacrifice are closely associated with—and defined by—men and masculinity (Enloe 1993; Goldstein 2001; Sasson-Levy 2008). However, recent policy changes in the US and elsewhere have lowered or entirely removed barriers to women serving in front-line combat roles. How does women increasingly serving—and sacrificing—in this “last bastion of masculinity” affect public attitudes on war and gender equality?<sup>2</sup>

The importance of answering this question is amplified by the high-profile policy change opening all combat positions in the US military to women, announced by then-Secretary of Defense Ash Carter in 2015.<sup>3</sup> In public discourse, both those in favor and opposed agree on the first-order consequences of the policy change: women are likely to die in combat in higher numbers.<sup>4</sup> However, proponents and critics of women occupying combat roles disagree both about how the public will

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<sup>1</sup>As of 2013, 17 countries allowed women to serve in front-line combat positions. See [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/01/25/map-which-countries-allow-women-in-front-line-combat-roles/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.007c34405402](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/01/25/map-which-countries-allow-women-in-front-line-combat-roles/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.007c34405402)

<sup>2</sup>For the origins of the phrase “last bastion of masculinity,” see Addelston and Stirratt (1996). On the military as a male-dominated space, see MacKenzie (2012).

<sup>3</sup>Carter made the final decision to lift the ban entirely, leaving no positions indefinitely closed to women. In 2013, the previous Secretary Leon Panetta rescinded the 1994 ban.

<sup>4</sup>US women dying in combat is not new, but numbers have historically been low. Since 2002, 169 women have died in America’s various overseas conflicts according to the Pentagon’s Defense Casualty Analysis System (data retrieved January 22, 2019). Lifting the combat exclusion is likely to increase the number of women dying in combat, holding fixed the intensity of US armed conflicts. By August 2018, the Army already had 740 women in previously combat-excluded roles (Kayyem 2018).

respond to increasing casualties, and the implications of these differential responses for broader society. For instance, opponents suggest that women casualties will dampen public support for war.<sup>5</sup> Facing public disillusionment, leaders, eager to garner and maintain public backing for the use of force (Baum 2004; Foyle 1999; Reiter and Stam 2002), might find their ability to fight and win wars severely diminished.

Others speculate that women fighting on the front lines and making heroic sacrifices in combat will have broad implications for how Americans view women both within and outside of the military. Disadvantaged groups have often viewed military service as a path toward broader equality. In many cases—for instance, African-Americans and immigrants in the US or the Druze in Israel—equality pertained to securing the full rights of citizenship (Krebs 2006). The particular manifestations of improved equality differ in the case of women and the contemporary US, where women already have the formal markers of citizenship, such as the rights to vote and to run for elective office. The sources of women’s inequality that remain are due to social status and gender norms rather than unequal legal status as citizens. Given that military culture is such a prominent feature of broader US culture, it is reasonable to expect that a shift in military culture, described by former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta as a “culture that ha[s] historically regarded women as less than equal to men,”<sup>6</sup> would influence public perceptions of women. The idea that women’s sacrifices may increase women’s social status is buttressed by a parallel body of research in political science on symbolic empowerment, whereby the actions of women in one domain can affect the actions and perceptions of women in another. Cognizant of these potentially sweeping social implications of women fighting and dying in combat, opponents charge that the impetus for the policy decision “has always been nonmilitary. . . but war isn’t about promoting equality.”<sup>7</sup>

Following the contours of both academic and policy debates (Mueller 1971; Gartner 2008a;

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<sup>5</sup>For example, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/work/putting-women-soldiers-like-me-on-the-front-line-is-dangerous/> and <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/05/19/why-dont-ever-want-to-see-women-in-combat-on-front-lines.html>.

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-helped-open-all-military-jobs-to-women-we-cant-go-backward/2019/03/11/1d69df9c-4437-11e9-aaf8-4512a6fe3439\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-helped-open-all-military-jobs-to-women-we-cant-go-backward/2019/03/11/1d69df9c-4437-11e9-aaf8-4512a6fe3439_story.html)

<sup>7</sup><https://www.wsj.com/articles/women-dont-belong-in-combat-units-11547411638>

Baum and Groeling 2010), we focus on the consequences of combat fatalities rather than military service more generally.<sup>8</sup> Since the casualties underpinning these consequentialist arguments about the effects of women dying in combat have yet to be realized, many of the policy arguments about whether women *ought* to be allowed to serve in combat rest upon untested empirical claims about the consequences of allowing them to do so. This study brings new evidence to bear on these speculative debates. Given the low number of observed women fatalities, and the challenge of holding fixed attributes of conflicts and attitudes toward women which could confound observational studies, we employ a series of survey experiments to do so.

We first fielded a survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of 1,400 American adults to assess whether women fighting and dying in combat erodes overall support for war. Varying the putative gender of a combat casualty, we show that women dying in combat has no discernible effect on public support for war. This finding challenges some past research and popular accounts that female combat fatalities will diminish support for military action (Gartner 2008b), while providing additional support for alternative accounts that emphasize the identity of those dying is immaterial to public support for conflict (Johns and Davies 2019). The null finding persists in two follow-up experiments on convenience samples collected through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) which vary the (1) type of adversary, (2) nature of the conflict, and (3) number of women dying. In sum, through a series of highly powered experiments and a wide range of scenarios, we find an abundance of evidence challenging the idea that women fighting and dying in combat will erode the public’s willingness to mobilize and to support war efforts.

We next turn to assessing empirically how women fighting and dying in combat affects perceptions of women’s equality. Across a series of survey experiments, we find that women dying in combat increases support for gender equality in the *public* realm (e.g., workplace success and fitness for leadership)—but that this effect is only consistently evident among women respondents. Within the *private* sphere (e.g., division of household duties), we observe mixed findings among

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<sup>8</sup>Of course, it could be the case that women merely serving in combat, rather than serving and dying, is sufficient to change attitudes. We empirically assess this idea in subsequent parts of the manuscript.

both men and women respondents. The results accord with studies finding that a growing segment of American society strongly supports public equality for women while simultaneously holding more traditional views of women in the private sphere (Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019).

Taken together, our results demonstrate how policies challenging long-held conceptions of gender and war can alter perceptions of women's competence and capabilities in a traditionally masculine realm. This shift does not erode leaders' ability to wage war, but does change public notions of women's equality within the US, among women respondents. We find the positive spillovers of military sacrifice accrue largely among members of the previously excluded group.

The results contribute to scholarly and policy debates by documenting the empirical consequences of women fighting and dying in the US military on public opinion. In so doing, we contribute to a growing body of work on the positivist study of gender and international relations (Goldstein 2001; Reiter 2015), particularly at the intersection of conflict and public opinion (Eichenberg 2019; Wood and Ramirez 2018). Our evidence directly challenges policy-based arguments opposing women serving in combat positions because it could undermine the state's ability to fight and win wars. While protective paternalistic attitudes might be prevalent throughout the public at large, these attitudinal differences do not lead to differential reactions to women dying in combat such that leaders' abilities to garner support for military action are hampered. We also find important evidence for, and limitations to, arguments that allowing women to serve in combat positions will be beneficial for women's equality. Our heterogeneous findings are consistent with a growing literature in conflict studies highlighting the divergent attitudes among women and men in a reaction to violent phenomena (Lindsey 2019). Our analysis joins a growing body of research exploring women serving in combat positions (Goldstein 2001; MacKenzie 2015), by bringing new evidence to bear on understanding the public opinion consequences of women entering "the last bastion of masculinity."

## 2 Theorizing the Effects of Women Dying in Combat

What are the consequences of women combat fatalities for public perceptions of the military and women's equality? We integrate scholarship at the intersection of international relations, public opinion, and gender with common contentions from public debates to formulate predictions for the consequences of women dying in combat.

### 2.1 Why Women Dying in Combat Would Erode Support for War

A voluminous literature on public support for war demonstrates how the public responds to costs and benefits when evaluating a war effort's merit (Gelpi 2010).<sup>9</sup> Key factors in this calculation include the prospects for victory (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2006), material stakes of the conflict (Jentleson 1992; Larson 1996; Eichenberg 2005), expected conflict duration (Huff and Schub 2017) and, most saliently, the human costs of fighting. The link between casualties and war support may depend on the overall number of casualties (Mueller 1971), trends in casualties (Gartner 2008a), or the richness of the information environment (Gartner 2008b; Baum and Groeling 2010). Building on this fatality-centric strand of research, this study focuses on the combat deaths of US soldiers.<sup>10</sup>

Given traditional conceptions of gender and war (Enloe 1993; Goldstein 2001; Sasson-Levy 2008), the public may view a woman soldier's death to be more costly than a man's death.<sup>11</sup> Prior scholarship suggests a swath of individuals believe that protecting women is more important than protecting men for both emotional and utilitarian reasons. Glick and Fiske (1996: 493) identify widespread protective paternalistic attitudes, a form of "benevolent sexism" rooted in affection for women and a perceived need to protect women because of their inherent "weakness." Protective paternalism's emotional underpinnings stem from the view that "women are to be loved, cherished and protected." This work also highlights how the protective paternalistic attitudes are undergirded

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<sup>9</sup>For a competing view, see Berinsky 2007.

<sup>10</sup>That said, as we discuss in subsequent sections, we empirically assess whether and how our results are shaped by whether a combatant survives or dies.

<sup>11</sup>For simplicity, we use the blanket term "soldier" to mean all individuals within the armed services.

by a more utilitarian logic. Men are dependent on women because of their reproductive and domestic labor; in particular, because of women's roles as "wives, mothers, and romantic objects" (Glick and Fiske 1996: 493). Together, both the emotional and utilitarian features of protective paternalism may increase the public's perceptions of the costs of women's battlefield deaths. By attaching greater cost to a woman combatant's death, overall conflict costs increase as women constitute an increasing share of combat fatalities. Higher conflict costs in turn reduce support for conflict, consistent with the literature suggesting a prudent public weighs conflict costs and benefits (Jentleson 1992; Gelpi 2010).<sup>12</sup>

A number of policy pundits opposed to opening combat positions highlight how the perceived cost of a woman dying in combat is higher than that of a man due to protective paternalistic attitudes. Typifying this logic, in 2012 Fox News Pundit Keith Ablow wrote that "I do not believe women should serve as combat soldiers. I know they are fully able to do so... But I can't deny that I value the special place of women in society as a protected gender." Ablow goes on to justify this argument, stating that "I just don't think it is some vestige of a prejudiced, Neanderthal perspective I harbor that I believe our nation could be doubly demoralized by women coming back from war in body bags in equal numbers to men. I think it is something else: Reality."<sup>13</sup> Or, as Kate Medina, a British Army reservist wrote in an op-ed opposing women serving on the frontlines, "Are we really ready to see our daughters gang raped, tortured and decapitated live on the Internet by ISIL fighters? Because that is exactly what will happen if a female front line soldier is captured in Syria."<sup>14</sup> These statements exhibit both emotional and utilitarian justifications for keeping women out of combat positions. Ablow's suggestion that women hold a "special place in society" and

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<sup>12</sup>This empirical prediction rests in part on underlying attitudes toward gender equality. While we focus on differential valuations of the lives of men and women, other recent work highlights how conceptions of masculinity affect the choice to use force at all (Wood and Ramirez 2018). If women dying in combat increases men's perceptions of women's equality, which in turn affects men's conceptions of their own masculinity, this could reduce men's support for the use of force more generally. We view the empirical testing of this logic as an interesting area of further research.

<sup>13</sup><http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/05/19/why-dont-ever-want-to-see-women-in-combat-on-front-lines.html>.

<sup>14</sup><https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/work/putting-women-soldiers-like-me-on-the-front-line-is-dangerous/>

this reflects “reality” could be interpreted through a utilitarian lens: women are needed as mothers and caregivers, and are thus less expendable than men. Medina’s concerns that society might not be ready to see our “daughters gang raped, tortured and decapitated” has clear emotional connotations regarding the gender-specific vulnerability of women. In sum, the public policy debates demonstrate both the emotional and utilitarian justifications underpinning our expectations for how women dying in combat might reduce support for war.

Scholarship on international relations (Gartner 2008b) and psychology (Glick and Fiske 1996), as well as public policy debates, provide a basis for expecting that the lives of men and women might be valued differently. However, recent research highlights how emotional considerations—such as the sex and age of a conflict casualty—might be less important for determining support for conflict than actuarial concerns such as the number of deaths. For example, Johns and Davies (2019) show that humanizing information about a foreign civilian casualty shapes emotional reactions but does not substantively change support for conflict. The authors find that it is the *number* of deaths—rather than the identity of those who have died—that is most important to evaluations of public support for war. Emotional considerations do not sway evaluations of a conflict’s merit. In contrast, in work most similar to our study evaluating combatant fatalities, Gartner (2008b) finds that information regarding a combatant’s sex *does* shift attitudes on a conflict’s merit under certain conditions; namely, when there is an absence of clear actuarial information. On the basis of Gartner’s finding, coupled with the partially utilitarian logic of protective paternalism prevalent in both research and policy debates, there is reason to expect that women combatant casualties reduce support support for conflict. We return to the issue of the relative importance of actuarial versus emotional considerations when discussing our null finding.

*H1: Public support for conflict is lower when casualties are women relative to when casualties are men.*

## 2.2 Why Women Dying in Combat Would Increase Perceptions of Women's Equality

Both proponents and opponents of allowing women to fight in combat roles highlight how doing so could shift gender dynamics more broadly throughout US society. Opposition to the policy change has long stemmed from anxieties over “alter[ing] the traditional role and image of women in American society” and disrupting the gendered division of labor wherein women are mothers and men are protectors.<sup>15</sup> Opponents often emphasize that the decision to lift the combat exclusion ban was born of “political correctness” rather than genuine military need. By contrast, those in favor of allowing women to serve in combat argue that this policy change could boost women's equality in the military and society more broadly. Women dying in combat is the starkest signal of front-line service and sacrifice. It provides an inescapable indicator of the roles newly opened to women, the risks attendant to those positions, and a potentially powerful argument in the pursuit for gender equality. In the remainder of this section, we first consider how women dying in conflict could change attitudes toward women's equality among the full public. We next consider how women dying in combat might change attitudes exclusively among women, while having no effect among men.

### 2.2.1 Changing Perceptions of Women's Equality Among the Full Public

A motivation for opening combat positions is the perception that it will foster greater support for women's equality more generally. Arguments in this vein trace back to at least the early 1980s. For example, [Ruddick \(1983\)](#)—reflecting on the conscription of women—writes that women in these roles may allow civilian women to gain respect, and challenge stereotypes and inequalities in civilian life. Women's organizations, such as the National Organization for Women and the Women's Research and Education Institute, argued that women are denied full civic equality if they are not serving in the military in the same ways as men ([Enloe 1994: 91](#)). [Enloe \(1994: 82\)](#)

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<sup>15</sup><https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/press-past/2013/05/15/arguing-for-and-against-women-in-combat-in-1978>

writes, “Violent sacrifice under state discipline in the name of the nation. . . is the essential criterion for first-class citizenship.” Krebs (2006: 19) finds that military service in general, and combat experience in particular, provide disadvantaged groups with a powerful rhetorical device to wield in their pursuit of equality. Rosemary Mariner, the first woman to command a naval aviation squadron, emphasized how equality of exposure to the risks of combat is closely linked to equality of social status: “If you cannot share the equal risks and hazards in arduous duty, then you are not equal.”<sup>16</sup> Several studies document changes in broader gender attitudes in response to observing women hold traditionally male-dominated roles. Women holding positions of political leadership can shift views on women’s fitness for such roles (Beaman et al. 2009; Reyes-Housholder 2016; Alexander and Jalalzai 2018). Evidence of symbolic empowerment is consistent with the idea that women serving and sacrificing in previously foreclosed military roles has the potential to challenge stereotypes and reduce political and social inequalities.

Recent history highlights the potential for women’s military service to persuade the public to reconsider women’s roles more generally. In the 2018 US midterm elections, women who served in the military ran for elective office in larger numbers than ever before. The fact of having status as a veteran increased public perceptions of the legitimacy and authority of female candidates, even wholly apart from their actual military service.<sup>17</sup> A military background may mitigate impediments to women running for political office (Fox and Lawless 2004). Women’s willingness to fight for the state on the front lines cuts against entrenched stereotypes about gender roles. We derive our second hypothesis from this logic.

Dying on the battlefield is the ultimate signal of military sacrifice, highlighting the service positions newly open to women, and reminding observers of changing task assignments. As a dramatic indicator of service in traditionally male roles, women’s combat deaths have the potential to produce attitudinal shifts on gender equality. However, detractors of granting women access to combat roles could interpret women soldiers dying, as opposed to simply serving, as confirming

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<sup>16</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/01/obituaries/rosemary-mariner-dead.html>

<sup>17</sup><http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/ct-military-women-candidates-20180207-story.html>

their vulnerability and unfitness to hold front line positions, and thereby attribute a woman's battlefield death to her poor performance. Consistent with dominative paternalism, a form of hostile sexism based on perceptions of women's ineptitude, or "viewing women as not fully competent adults" (Glick and Fiske 1996: 493), female fatalities could corroborate a skeptic's prior beliefs that women ought not to enjoy equal access to traditionally male roles. Though theoretically possible, we find such a backlash effect to be unlikely to swamp the positive response typically associated with military service and sacrifice. Our experimental design, discussed below, provides some empirical leverage on the matter. A backlash effect is especially questionable in the contemporary US context in which the military is often discussed in laudatory terms. Accordingly, we anticipate that women combatants dying increases support for gender equality.

*H2: Public support for women's equality is higher when casualties are women compared to when casualties are men.*

### **2.2.2 Changing Perceptions of Women's Equality Among Women**

While the studies highlighted above identify broad spillover effects on attitudes toward gender equality, other research finds that exposure to women assuming traditionally male roles induces attitudinal shifts only among women. In the latter case, changes in response to observing women casualties should be concentrated among women while having little to no effect on men's attitudes. Several prior studies support this expectation. Beaman et al. (2012), for instance, find that when exposed to women political leaders in India, mothers increase their aspirations for daughters across multiple outcomes. By contrast, the effect among fathers is narrowly circumscribed. Alexander (2012) finds that an increase in the number of women legislators is associated with more women respondents indicating that women are equally fit to be political leaders; attitudinal shifts among men are notably smaller. The possibility of heterogeneous effects is similarly evident in public discourse. President Obama referenced this possibility in a 2012 commencement address stating, "Until a girl can imagine herself, can picture herself as a computer programmer, or a combatant commander, she won't become one."<sup>18</sup> Witnessing women serving heroically and making the

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<sup>18</sup>[rb.gy/o2sxph](http://rb.gy/o2sxph)

ultimate sacrifice in previously foreclosed roles could generate similar asymmetric responses: igniting more egalitarian views among women while having negligible effects among men. A third hypothesis follows from this line of reasoning.

*H3: Among female respondents, public support for women’s equality is higher when casualties are women when compared when casualties are men.*

### 3 Experimental Research Design

We designed a series of survey experiments to assess the consequences of women dying in combat. The first survey experiment was fielded on a nationally-representative sample of approximately 1,400 adults through the Harvard-Harris Poll in May 2018. The second survey experiment was conducted on MTurk and, as detailed below, was designed to replicate the core findings of H1 while incorporating a greater number of casualties. The third survey experiment, also conducted on MTurk, allowed for further testing of heterogeneous effects by respondent gender for H3, which necessitated greater statistical power. It also varies whether combatants die or survive. While we prioritize fatalities due to their high salience and emphasis in past scholarship, the third experiment allows us to assess whether combatants dying is necessary to produce attitudinal changes, or instead whether serving as equals is sufficient. Taken together, the three experiments enable us to analyze the consequences of women dying in combat while holding constant variables that could affect attitudes on the conflict—such as the stakes, costs, and adversary—or views on gender equality.

Table 1 summarizes the motivation, sample, sample size, and substantive variation for the three experiments.<sup>19</sup> For simplicity, the sections that follow present the experimental design for the

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<sup>19</sup>We use the following process to address concerns about the quality of MTurk responses provided through Virtual Private Servers. First, we flag responses with duplicate latitude and longitude coordinates. Second, we collect information on the IP addresses of all flagged responses using <https://www.infobyip.com/ipbulklookup.php>. Third, we exclude respondents if the IP address (1) is located outside of the United States or (2) is associated with a known Virtual Private Server associated with low quality MTurk responses (Dennis, Goodson, and Pearson 2018). In the first MTurk survey, this process flagged 204 responses in a total pool of 2,011. The process flagged 322 responses in a total pool of 2,811 in the second MTurk survey. Table 1 provides the sample size after removing flagged responses.

Harvard-Harris Poll. In the results presentation, we then introduce the MTurk experiments when they help address theoretically-motivated follow-up question.

<b>Experiment</b>	<b>Original</b>	<b>Follow-up 1</b>	<b>Follow-up 2</b>
<b>Motivation</b>	Testing H1, H2, and H3	Robustness of H1 findings	Larger and longer survey for robustness of H3 results
<b>Sample</b>	Nationally representative (Harvard-Harris)	Convenience (MTurk)	Convenience (MTurk)
<b>Sample Size</b>	1,436	1,807	2,489
<b>Substantive Variation</b>	Varies the putative gender of a combat casualty and adversary type	Varies the gender composition of multiple combat casualties and adversary type	Varies the putative gender of a combatant and whether, after serving admirably, they die or survive
<b>Vignette Text Summary</b>	Text varies (1) the putative gender of a combat casualty and (2) whether the adversary is a rebel militia or terrorist organization.	Text varies (1) the number of women casualties between no information, 2, and 12 and (2) whether the adversary is an imminent threat and wants to attack homeland.	Text varies (1) the putative gender of a combatant and (2) whether the soldier sacrificed their life during the mission.
<b>Outcome Questions</b>	Evaluate whether mission was a mistake; Measure support for gender equality in the public and private spheres.	Evaluate whether mission was a mistake; no questions about gender equality.	Evaluate whether mission was a mistake; Measure support for gender equality in the public and private spheres.

Table 1: **Summary of the three experiments, sample sizes, and substantive motivation.** Each of the two follow-ups were designed to either test additional theoretically motivated concerns about the scope of the findings (such as number of casualties) or increase the number of questions and statistical power to assess the robustness of the results.

### 3.1 The Survey Instrument

The Harvard-Harris survey design contains four components. These are: (1) background information about the conflict, (2) the gender of a casualty, which is randomized between a woman and

a man, (3) an outcome question measuring support for the conflict, and (4) a second set of outcome questions measuring support for gender equality beyond the battlefield. This section discusses each component.

Respondents first view a vignette providing background information about a hypothetical conflict scenario involving US service-members. We vary two components of the vignette. First, we provide background information about the deployment of Special Forces soldiers where we vary the adversary being fought. Because prior research demonstrates that the objective of a conflict mission affects public support (Jentleson 1992; Eichenberg 2005; Larson 1996), we randomize between two scenarios in order to assess whether effects are specific to a given conflict setting or are more generalizable. Specifically, the vignette indicates that US forces are deployed in Africa and working with local forces to either combat a rebel militia group or an Islamic terrorist organization.<sup>20</sup> Our aim is to mirror the types of conflicts that the US is currently fighting and situations to which men and women ground troops could be deployed. We find no substantively meaningful effect heterogeneity across opponent types.

Respondents then receive information about a combat operation during which a US soldier was killed. We vary the name of the individual who was killed between “Todd Ryan” and “Molly Ryan.” The approach of varying a name to cue the gender<sup>21</sup> of an individual follows from the voluminous body of audit studies in political science and economics. These studies vary the putative race<sup>22</sup> or gender of individuals through their names<sup>23</sup> and study the effects across political,

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<sup>20</sup>Given the lengthy US experience combating Islamic terrorist organizations, respondents may hold strong prior beliefs on this vignette. If true, this would attenuate treatment effects as attitudes are no longer malleable.

<sup>21</sup>The policy changes toward opening combat roles to women generally focus on the biological *sex* of the soldiers. However, the experimental manipulation, which varied the name of an individual between Todd and Molly, is manipulating perceptions of the soldier’s *gender*. These are related—but theoretically distinct—concepts.

<sup>22</sup>The two names manipulated in the study are putatively white names. We focus on white names because the US military is majority white; racial and ethnic minorities comprise 40% of active-duty military personnel (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/6-facts-about-the-u-s-military-and-its-changing-demographics/>). This breakdown is even more extreme in the Special Forces. Enlisted members of the Army Green Berets and the Navy SEALs, for example, are 4.5 and 2% black, respectively (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/08/05/diversity-seals-green-berets/31122851/>).

<sup>23</sup>For an evaluation of the benefits of this approach, see Butler and Homola (2017).

economic, or social outcomes of interest (Fryer Jr and Levitt 2004; White et al. 2018). Consistent with much of this work, we limit the name treatment to a single person to keep the presentation and interpretation of our main effect as simple as possible. We chose a single death for our main study to mirror casualty dynamics from recent US combat operations. Additionally, a single death arguably increases the likelihood that respondents will take the treatment; research suggests that people are desensitized to large numbers of deaths. That said, a follow-up experiment includes a larger number of fatalities and states the gender composition rather than signaling it via gendered names. The hypothetical background conflict scenario and randomized female casualty treatment are based on a real news article, and reads:<sup>24</sup>

Please consider the following hypothetical scenario. Members of a United States Special Forces unit are deployed abroad and working with local government forces to combat [a rebel militia group based in Africa // an Islamic terrorist organization based in Africa.]

During a recent operation, enemy forces ambushed the unit resulting in the death of a U.S. soldier named [Todd Ryan // Molly Ryan].

[Todd/Molly]’s parents describe [him/her] as a fun-loving and free-spirited individual. Reflecting on [Todd/Molly]’s death, they recently stated “there isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think of [him/her].”

Finally, it is important to highlight the type of scenario this vignette approximates. The vignette is designed to reflect the content of actual news articles reporting women’s deaths in combat. Alternative research designs pose several challenges. It is not possible, logistically or ethically, to

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<sup>24</sup>For the original article, see <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-women-veterans-poster-20160603-story.html>.

manipulate when and how women die in combat. In addition, the overall small number of women who have died in combat makes conducting observational analyses fraught. For this reason, we rely on an experimental survey design where we can hold fixed attributes of the real world that might confound analyses, while relying on a form of treatment that a wide range of audit studies research has shown to be effective for manipulating respondents' perceptions of race and gender (Butler and Homola 2017; Fryer Jr and Levitt 2004; Lavergne and Mullainathan 2004; White et al. 2018; White, Nathan, and Faller 2015).

## **3.2 The Outcome Questions**

After reading the vignette, respondents answer two sets of outcome questions. The first concerns public support for the conflict, building on literature linking casualties to diminished public support for war (Mueller 1971; Gartner and Segura 2000; Gartner 2008a; Baum and Groeling 2010). If the presence of female casualties affects overall support, then integrating women into combat units may constrain future decisions about using force as well as the types of operations that are politically viable (for example, by increasing support for drone strikes that reduce human costs borne by the US). The second set of outcome questions concern attitudes on gender equality.

### **3.2.1 Support for the Use of Force**

To assess Hypotheses 1 for how women dying in combat affects support for the use of force, respondents indicate whether they view US participation in the conflict as a mistake. Surveys on war support often employ a question of this form. Mueller (1973), for instance, assesses the relationship between casualties and war support based on questions soliciting retrospective evaluations of whether it was a mistake to enter the war.<sup>25</sup> Participants use a seven point Likert scale varying from strongly agree to strongly disagree, to indicate their support for the following prompt.

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<sup>25</sup>While no single question captures all salient elements of attitudes on the use of force (Berinsky and Druckman 2007), we follow past templates in order to increase comparability to prior studies.

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement. In light of what happened, the United States made a mistake sending in the Special Forces soldiers.

Respondents then answer two additional questions to assess the theoretical mechanisms underpinning Hypothesis 1. Given space constraints and the fact that we observe a substantively inconsequential effect for whether the operation was a mistake, we present these mechanism questions and results in the Supporting Information (SI).

### **3.2.2 Support for Gender Equality**

We next asked a series of outcome questions intended to assess Hypotheses 2 and 3. Following research which highlights the multidimensional nature of attitudes toward gender equality, we employ two subsets of outcome questions (England 2010; Pepin and Cotter 2018; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019). These respectively focus on gender equality in public (e.g., workplace success and fitness for leadership)<sup>26</sup> and in private (e.g., division of household duties). Scarborough, Sin, and Risman (2019) demonstrate that perceptions of public equality are clearly separable from perceptions of private equality. Recognizing this distinction, we include questions geared toward understanding gender equality attitudes in the public and private spheres. Due to space limitations on the Harvard-Harris survey, for the public equality questions we randomized whether respondents received a prompt on fitness for leadership in either the military or political realm. A follow-up study (Follow-up 2 as presented in Table 1) supplements these responses by asking all respondents for their views on leadership aptitude in the military, political, and business realms. To measure attitudes on public gender equality, Harvard-Harris respondents indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statement.

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<sup>26</sup>These are standard, widely-used questions regarding women's equality from the World Values Survey, see <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>

On the whole, men make better [military leaders //political leaders] than women do.

Another outcome question gauges whether observing women dying on the battlefield inspires attitudinal changes on women's equality in the private sphere. We follow [Dahl, Kotsadam, and Rooth \(2018\)](#), who employ creative questions about the optimal division of household labor. Specifically, we analyze whether women serving and dying in combat causes a change in respondent views on the ideal division of chores in the home.<sup>27</sup>

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement. It is important for men and women to share household work equally.

In sum, we randomize whether a male or female combatant dies in a hypothetical conflict vignette and then solicit respondent attitudes on the merits of the conflict itself, gender equality in public leadership roles, and gender equality inside the home. These two sets of questions reflect the important variation in attitudes about equality in public roles, including the most directly relevant realm of military leadership, versus private roles. Developing additional measures of women's public and private equality—and perhaps particularly those that are closely linked to military service—is an important area of future research.

## 4 Results

We present the results in two sections. The first consistently shows no relationship between a combatant's gender and respondents' views on whether military operations were a mistake. The second section tests Hypotheses 2 and 3, examining whether learning of a female soldier's death affects perceptions of women's equality in non-combat domains. We find female casualties cause

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<sup>27</sup>We use a question from Pew; <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/30/sharing-chores-a-key-to-good-marriage-say-majority-of-married-adults/>.

Hypothesis	Expectation	Finding
Hypothesis 1	Public support for conflict is lower when casualties are women relative to when casualties are men.	Unsupported
Hypothesis 2	Public support for women’s equality is higher when casualties are women when compared to when casualties are men.	Mixed support
Hypothesis 3	Among female respondents, public support for women’s equality is higher when casualties are women when compared when casualties are men.	Consistent support for <i>public</i> equality only

Table 2: **Summary of hypotheses and main findings**

more pronounced support for gender equality among women respondents (H3) as compared to among all respondents (H2). Table 2 summarizes the hypotheses and findings.

#### 4.1 Women Dying in Combat Does Not Erode Support for War

Does a female soldier dying during a combat mission increase the likelihood that respondents view that mission as a mistake? We analyze the experimental results with models that include standard controls for factors that may affect the outcome variable, including respondent gender, age, race, education, and political ideology. All specifications use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS), which assumes linearity across the Likert scale response levels.

We first find that the gender of the combat casualty has little effect on respondent views toward the mission.<sup>28</sup> Across the full sample with all covariates held at their median values, the predicted response when “Todd” dies is 3.93 on a 1 to 7 scale, with higher values indicating stronger agree-

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<sup>28</sup>Appendix Table A1 presents full model results.

ment that the mission was a mistake. The marginal effect of shifting to “Molly” dying is only -0.03 ( $\pm 0.16$  at the 95% confidence level). In Figure 1, the top line plots this result and clearly indicates that we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no effect. While a statistically null result is not necessarily indicative of a substantively negligible effect (Rainey 2014), evidence suggests the effect here is insubstantial; the confidence interval bounds the effect close to zero. The lower two lines show that there is little effect heterogeneity across respondent gender. We also do not find effect heterogeneity across opponent type or respondent ideology. In sum, there is little evidence—based on a nationally representative sample—that the public “won’t tolerate...women coming home in body bags,”<sup>29</sup> or is more sensitive to female combatant deaths.

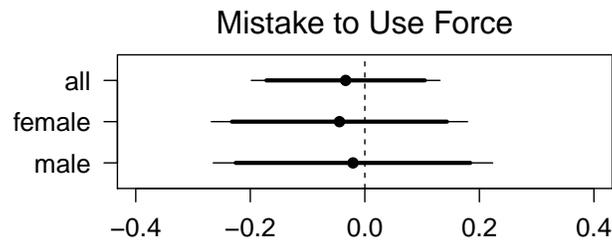


Figure 1: Marginal effect of shifting from male to female fatality on whether mission was a mistake, split by respondent gender. Higher values (1-7 scale) indicate greater agreement it was a mistake. Thick segments indicate 90% confidence interval; thin segments indicate 95% confidence interval.

The first follow-up study addresses potential limitations with the original experimental design. Although Gartner (2008b) suggests a low-information environment is where we should be *most* likely to observe an effect, one concern may be that the original study provided insufficient information. As a result, respondents may feel unable to make an informed judgment on whether the conflict was a mistake, which would bias results toward zero. A second concern is that, by experimentally manipulating only a single name, the original study did not provide a sufficient number of women dying in combat. This design choice matters empirically if differential responses to the gender of combat casualties only activates with higher fatality numbers. The follow-up study administered to 1,807 respondents on MTurk addressed these concerns with an alternative vignette.

<sup>29</sup><https://www.cbsnews.com/news/report-women-should-be-allowed-in-combat/>

It provides additional background information on the conflict setting<sup>30</sup> and specifies that 56 US soldiers died in combat,<sup>31</sup> of which there were either (1) no female casualties, (2) two female casualties, or (3) 12 female casualties.

As in the original Harvard-Harris study, the gender of fatalities has no meaningful or statistical effect on whether the public deems the operation a mistake (results reported in Appendix Table A1; Appendix Section 2.4 shows that effects are similar across adversary type). Thus, across experiments on nationally representative and convenience samples, we find that a combatant's gender does not affect attitudes on using force. The results contradict the theorized possibility that observers assign greater costs to female fatalities. To be clear, the results indicate that female fatalities cause no shift in attitudes compared to male fatalities, which is distinct from showing that female fatalities have no effect compared to a scenario with no fatalities. Prior work consistently shows that casualties reduce public support for conflict whereas we focus on the *relative* effects of different types of casualties.

The results are thus consistent with a more dispassionate accounting of conflict costs and benefits rather than public responsiveness to humanizing details of conflict fatalities (Johns and Davies 2019). Our findings thus challenge the results of Gartner (2008b), which reports that when overall casualty trends are uncertain, respondents are more likely to withdraw support for a conflict when learning of female casualties. Even using a minimalist vignette, we observe a null finding.

There are three plausible explanations for the differences in results between our study when compared to Gartner (2008b). The first explanation is that attitudes toward women have changed over time. Our survey was fielded nearly 15 years after Gartner's initial study. If the case, this would challenge a pervasive—and possibly flawed—assumption in the gender and IR literature that perceptions of gender are stable over time. This could in part be the result of the global rise of women holding leadership positions traditionally occupied by men—including as ministers of

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<sup>30</sup>For instance, it informs respondents that US forces have fought the adversary over the past year and that the adversary poses a threat to either the local state's government or regional US interests. See the SI for details.

<sup>31</sup>The number 56 is chosen to mirror the 56 soldiers who died in 2014 as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

defense—which fosters increasing acceptance of revised gender dynamics (Barnes and O’Brien 2018; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009; Koch and Fulton 2011; Reyes-Housholder 2016). Our results suggest that American society may have become more tolerant of women’s deaths, perhaps providing evidence of a rapid shift in gender norms since Gartner’s study was fielded. If a shift in gender norms does explain the different results, that shift appears to be broad-based rather than concentrated among younger respondents. As shown in Appendix Figure A1, we do not find substantively or statistically significant heterogeneity in treatment effects across respondent age.

The second explanation is that attitudes toward women in the military have changed over time. On the one hand, the public may have become desensitized to women dying in combat given that it has occurred with some regularity during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our experiment was fielded approximately fifteen years after the first woman died while serving during the Iraq War. At the same time, the Department of Defense’s 2015 policy decision to open all combat roles to women could itself dampen casualty sensitivity to female fatalities. The US public expresses high confidence and trust in the military<sup>32</sup> and exhibits high responsiveness to messaging cues from military officials (Golby, Feaver, and Dropp 2018). These dual forces, in the form of desensitization as a result of the existence of women already dying in combat paired with the policy choices of the military could signal to the public that protective paternalism is misplaced.

A final explanation is that the public has become more dispassionate when considering the costs and benefits of support for war (Johns and Davies 2019). In this sense, the differences between the results presented in our study and that of Gartner (2008b) is not due to the fact that attitudes toward women either inside or outside of the military have changed; rather, the importance of casualties as a first-order determinant of support for war has increased. This first-order nature of the casualty information thus overrides all other “secondary information,” such as the gender of the combat casualty, even when the first-order information is relatively scarce.

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<sup>32</sup><https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/04/trust-in-the-military-exceeds-trust-in-other-institutions-in-western-europe-and-u-s/>

## 4.2 Shifting Women's Views on Women's Equality in the Public Sphere

We hypothesized that observing women serving and dying in venerated, typically male roles may affect all respondents' views on gender equality (H2) or only those of women respondents (H3). We find consistent support for the latter but not the former. The results suggest that events on the battlefield create attitudinal spillovers to other public domains. However, the spillover effect is concentrated among women, the historically underprivileged group.

Figure 2 presents the findings for both hypotheses. The top portion addresses the assessed aptitude of women leaders (gender equality in the public sphere) while the bottom portion concerns the division of labor in the private sphere. The left panel plots treatment effects among all respondents while the right panel plots the equivalent among women respondents.

Starting with the full sample results (H2), no consistent picture emerges from the plotted marginal effects of shifting from a male to female combat casualty on support for gender equality (see Appendix Table A2 for full results). Responses from the Harvard-Harris survey show that the gender of a combat fatality has limited effect on views toward women occupying leadership roles. We cannot preclude the null hypothesis of no difference. However, we observe larger treatment effects among the MTurk respondents, which remain statistically significant ( $p < 0.1$ ) after adjusting for multiple comparisons (Benjamini and Hochberg 1995). This offers tentative evidence consistent with symbolic empowerment, such that observing a woman make the ultimate sacrifice in combat induces greater support for gender equality in the public professional domain. Yet the mixed results suggest the matter warrants caution and further study. Similarly inconclusive results emerge on views toward equality in the home. Across the full Harvard-Harris sample, shifting to a female fatality caused an increase in support for an equitable division of household duties. However, this result failed to replicate in the second MTurk follow-up referenced above which also varied whether combatants survived or died.

Overall, the full sample analyses are insufficient to preclude the null hypothesis of no difference in support for gender equality, either public or private, following the death of a female combatant. Rather, the inconsistent results across survey waves attest to the value of replicating the original

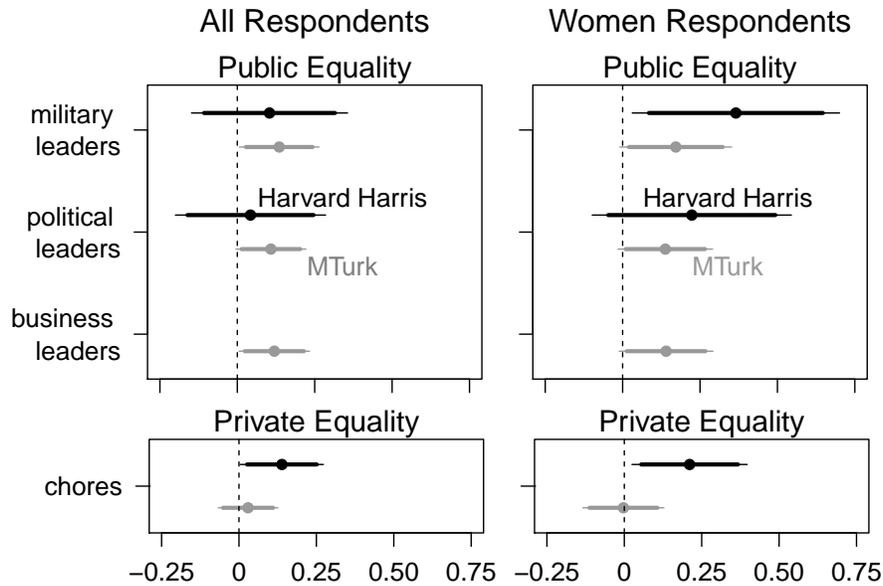


Figure 2: Marginal effect of shifting from male to female combatants on support for gender equality. Higher values (1-7 scale) indicate greater support for equality. Thick segments indicate 90% confidence interval; thin segments indicate 95% confidence interval. Black bars show effects from the Harvard-Harris survey; grey bars show effects from the second follow-up MTurk survey. Harvard-Harris survey did not ask about business leaders due to space constraints.

survey.

Results are consistently stronger among women respondents (H3), as shown in Figure 2's right panel and Appendix Table A3-A4. Women serving and dying in combat increases women's perceptions of gender equality in the public domain. For four of the five public equality outcome variables measured across two distinct samples, we observe a positive effect that is statistically significant at the  $\alpha = 0.1$  level. On the military leadership outcome question in the nationally representative Harvard-Harris sample, women respondents who received the male combatant condition averaged a 4.4 on the 1 to 7 scale with higher values indicating more support for gender equality. Shifting to a female combatant caused a 0.37 increase ( $\pm 0.33$  at the 95% confidence level) in responses. For the political leaders outcome question, however, the point estimate is positive and directionally consistent with the hypothesis but statistically insufficient to reject the null hypothesis.

The Harvard-Harris survey imposed limits on the theoretically motivated sub-sample (women only) analyses we wished to conduct for Hypothesis 3. For this reason, in the second MTurk

experiment we again asked respondents about their perceptions of women's equality as military and political leaders, while also adding an additional measure for women as equals as business leaders. All respondents answered all three questions which more than triples the number of responses for each outcome when compared to the Harvard-Harris survey. Across the three outcome measures in the second MTurk survey, we find positive and statistically significant effects of women dying in combat at the  $\alpha = 0.1$  level. Results remain statistically significant at this level after adjusting for multiple comparisons. Additionally, see Appendix Table A4 for effects among male respondents which are substantively small and statistically insignificant.

This study's primary interest is the effect of combat fatalities. However, the second follow-up survey also evaluated the effect of a combatant surviving rather than dying. As Appendix Section 2.3 shows and discusses, we find no statistically significant difference in effect sizes for attitudes toward gender equality in the public sphere based on whether the combatant dies or survives. Substantively, the lack of treatment effect heterogeneity suggests that learning of women dying is qualitatively similar to learning of women generally fighting in combat positions. Death does not generate stark or unique effects for attitudes on public sphere gender equality. There is no sign of the previously discussed backlash effect whereby respondents learning of a woman's battlefield death become *less* supportive of gender equality based on an inference that the death stems from unfitness to serve in traditionally male positions (see Appendix Section 2.3 for further discussion of these results).

That observing a group member fulfill a counter-stereotypical role shifts beliefs on other group members' fitness is most strongly evident in the most closely related domain of military leadership. Proponents of opening combat roles to women suggest that it could crack the "brass ceiling" given that combat is often a prerequisite for promotion. A similar line of reasoning appears to influence public opinion. Individuals view other women as increasingly well-suited for military leadership positions in response to female combat fatalities. Contrary to proponents' most optimistic arguments, however, the attitudinal shift is confined to members of the group seeking enhanced status and equal footing.

Results in the private sphere of dividing household chores provide further reason for hesitation about whether combat service paves the way toward first-class citizenship for women. As seen in the lower portion of Figure 2's right panel, we find mixed results. Positive spillovers from the battlefield to the home, which we found among the Harvard-Harris female respondents, did not replicate among female MTurk respondents. Relatively consistent spillovers in the public sphere as opposed to the mixed findings in the private sphere highlight the importance of differentiating between theoretically distinct conceptions of gender equality.

## 5 Conclusion

With the removal of gender barriers on all combat roles, female front-line fatalities are likely to become a more regular feature of US military conflicts. These deaths challenge traditional conceptions of the military as a masculine institution, and the construction of the heroic warrior as male. Contradicting some past research and conventional wisdom, we find no evidence that women dying in battle alters popular views on using force. On the other hand, we do find support for the idea that women dying in combat can change *women's* perceptions of women's equality, particularly in the public sphere of work and politics. The fact that we observe men and women reacting differently to women dying in combat highlights the complex and conditional nature of spillovers from battlefield sacrifices. Combat service—and indeed, combat sacrifice—alone appears to be insufficient to yield women's "first-class citizenship" among the US public that the most ardent supporters hope to achieve. Rather, what gains do materialize largely accrue among members of the previously excluded group.

The 2015 decision to open all combat positions was, and still is, a hotly contested policy decision. This issue was seemingly reopened in September 2018 by then-Defense Secretary Mattis when he stated it was unclear whether women serving in combat units was "a strength or a weakness" and that "the jury is out."<sup>33</sup> Those on both sides of the debate commonly invoke arguments about the far-reaching societal implications of the policy change. And yet, many of these claims

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<sup>33</sup><https://taskandpurpose.com/mattis-female-infantry-combat/>

are made with limited, if any, evidence. In this analysis, we use new evidence to shed light on these debates, and in doing so, demonstrate that several of the claims are overblown. At the same time, our results are consistent with the idea that the actions of women in the international sphere can affect attitudes on the domestic front. As women increasingly assume prominent national security roles—whether as state leaders, defense ministers, or front-line combat soldiers—an important area for future research will be to understand the role of women in shaping when and how states wage war, and how those choices in turn affect the domestic politics of states.

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