

## DEFENSE DEPARTMENT IN FIRING LINE: MILITARY WOMEN SAY CONSIDER OUR SKILLS NOT OUR GENDER



Four military women along with the New York based Service Women's Action Network have filed a lawsuit, challenging the military's procedure of restricting women from many combat positions. The four plaintiffs are Marine 1st Lt. Colleen Farrell, Marine Reserves Capt. Zoe Bedell, Army Staff Sgt. Jennifer Hunt and Air Guard Major Mary Jennings Hegar. The four women have all served in Afghanistan or Iraq, and have records of meritorious service; two of them have received the Purple Heart. Hegar was also awarded the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Flying Cross with a Valor Device for exemplary courage in an aerial mission near Kandahar Airfield three years ago. Speaking to the press Hegar said, the issue was not about gender, "It's about skill sets that have a lot less to do with how much you can lift or what chromosome you carry." The plaintiffs are alleging that their rights have been violated and that they should not be excluded from some specific combat positions, which are currently exclusively domain of men. Anu Bhagwati, executive director of SWAN and a former Marine Corps captain, issued a statement saying that the exclusion policy was outmoded and did not reflect the actuality of contemporary warfare. Neither did it embody the values the military advocates or reflect on what American service women were capable of. She says that whether women can handle such jobs, should be based on merit and the military should not adopt an all-encompassing rule that prohibits all women – which in fact shows them to be inferior to men and relegates them to second-class citizenship. Pentagon statistics show that female personnel on active duty comprise around 15 percent of the 1.4 million troops in the country. Yet, of its upwards of 280,000 members, a mere 7 percent make it to the ranks of general officers. 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule, which not only bars women from some combat positions also allows the officers to limit women from positions that necessitate physically demanding tasks, that need sharing living space with combat troops, or a lack of privacy. There are several cases of women serving in combat, but it goes unrecognized. This can curtail their advancement and also limit access to benefits that could otherwise accrue. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who has introduced legislation seeking repeal of the military's exclusion policies said, "Women are already fighting and dying for our country shoulder-to-shoulder with their brothers in uniform on the frontlines, but without the formal recognition that is essential for them to advance and obtain the benefits they have earned." Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has sought an update from his services to help formulate gender-neutral physical standards. Lainez, the Defense Department spokeswoman, said that the new policies and others that will follow are based on feedback from services, joint staff and combatant commanders and heralds a beginning. She said that our ultimate aim is that those who are part of a mission are the most qualified and capable to be in it and not because they are men or women. Hegar said that she failed to understand the disparity, since the women have already proven themselves on the battlefield. She said, what is that they do differently from their male counterparts, they shoot, they return fire when ambushed. They also put their lives on line engaging with the enemy or dragging wounded comrades to safety. They have been fighting along with their male brethren. Their patriotism, courage and capabilities are never in doubt – by enforcing a policy that seeks to exclude them is not fair and does the women a great disservice, she said.