

## Can Gender-Norming in Basic Physical Fitness Standards Be Ethically Justified?

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Among the challenges that face military organizations integrating women into combat positions is that of determining what standards for physical fitness and physical capability must be met by members of a gender integrated force. On the one hand, it is clear that some combat positions presuppose specific physical capabilities. Weapons loaders, for example, must be capable of safely handling the arsenal. On the other hand, there are positions, including some combat positions, which do not presuppose a specific set of physical capabilities. Ballistic missile officers are an example. Even so, longstanding military practice requires that every member satisfy basic standards for physical health and fitness. Basic physical preparedness is thought to be a fundamental starting point for military service.

At present, the U.S. military recognizes different standards for basic physical fitness across lines of gender and age. In particular, the standards for men are higher on the whole than the standards for women and the standards for younger service members are higher than the standards for older service members. These distinctions raise two ethical issues. First, are they fair? Assuming that we are focused on military organizations in liberal democracies, questions of fairness and justice are relevant to service. We would be quite concerned, for example, if risky combat operations were assigned on the basis of socio-economic status, e.g., the poor were required to take the lead. Second, are these distinctions conducive to the success of the military in its mission? Presumably differences in the physical fitness standards, as deviations from equal treatment, serve the interests of the military. Is this correct? Would other forms of differentiation better serve the interests of the organization? While these questions may require empirical study for a whole answer, conceptual and ethical reflection will be a valuable starting point in this discussion.

In this paper, I will argue that the current practices are ethically problematic: they fail to do justice both to deontological concerns about fairness and to teleological (i.e., consequentialist and virtue theoretic) concerns about the cultivation of an effective fighting force. In Part 1 of the paper I tackle deontological concerns related to fairness. I argue that while gender-norming has the clear and noble aim of establishing equitable standards, it falls short. In Part 2 I argue that the contemporary practice compromises the goals of mutual and individual respect that lie at the heart of unit cohesion and morale—characteristics regarded by many as lying at the heart of an effective fighting force. Finally, in Part 3, I consider alternatives. In my view, gender should not be a distinguishing factor in establishing physical fitness standards. Either differences in standards on the basis of gender should be eliminated completely or differences in standards should be grounded on a much richer set of physiological markers that, while correlated with gender, cannot be reduced to it. Which of these two options we pursue will depend on whether we think that military service requires a fixed minimum standard for physical fitness across all members or we think that military service merely requires physical fitness relative to the capabilities of each individual considered as an individual. I conclude with a brief set of considerations in favor of the latter.