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Opinion

Navy submarines: What's really in the way of women serving?

If mixing crew genders can work for NASA, Canada, and Norway, it can work on a Navy submarine.



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By Taraneh Ghajar-Jerven / March 9, 2010

Washington

Defense Secretary Robert Gates notified Congress in a letter Feb. 19 that the Navy intends to repeal the Congressional ban on female personnel on submarines. It's about time.

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Navy policy, not law, has prohibited women from serving aboard submarines. By law, women have had the right to serve on all combatant vessels since 1994, when Congress repealed Title 10 Section 6015. At that time, women became integrated into naval aviation and surface vessel crews. Subs are the only place in the fleet with retrogressive gender restrictions.

Despite the fact that integration was legal and was successful on destroyers and aircraft carriers, the Navy deemed the cost of redesigning submarines for female accommodations and privacy too

costly.

Since 1994, integrating submarines has been repeatedly delayed. Many, including the Alliance for National Defense, believe the delays were unnecessary, not the result of insurmountable logistical issues. They cite expenditures on Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) design where new submarines built did not reflect the requirements for gender neutral design.

After 2000, when the Navy shifted its policy, and moved to integrate submarine crews, congressional legislation became the impediment. Congress included a barrier to the Navy's ability to assign females to submarines in the 2001 Defense Authorization Bill, blocking the Navy's policy change toward women and subs, despite the Navy's willingness to integrate and enlisted women's eagerness to gain access.

Nine years later, women still cannot serve on submarine crews. Gates's recent letter to Congress represents another opportunity to change this. Congress has until the week of April 16 to weigh in on this hot-button issue. But reopening the debate is superfluous because Congress rightly repealed the law preventing women serving as submarine crew members 16 years ago.

The Navy and legislative branch have to stop dragging their collective feet and get capable women on board. Those who graduate from the Naval Academy this year should be among the first women to serve on submarines.

According to the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), which researched the cohabitation issue, integration of existing subs could have begun in 2000. In the long term, DACOWITS recommends that the larger Virginia class subs be redesigned as gender neutral.

Current Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus is also ready to see more women receive training and serve on subs. "We are moving out aggressively on this," Mr. Mabus said in a 2009 interview. "I believe women should have every opportunity to serve at sea, and that includes aboard submarines."

Historically, attempts to exclude citizens based on gender or race have been ultimately unsuccessful. But the issue here is more than just a demand for gender equality. Navy recruitment is cyclical. Prohibiting women from serving aboard submarines not only limits their Navy career potential, it also limits the Navy, which has a limited talent pool of nuclear-trained service personnel.

Women make up 15 percent of the Navy. And there is a need for more nuclear-trained recruits who can serve on subs. "We know there are capable young women in the Navy and women who are interested in the Navy who have the talent and desire to succeed in the submarine force," said Lt. Justin Cole, a Navy spokesman. "Enabling them to serve there is best for the submarine force and our Navy."

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Navy submarines: What's really in the way of women serving?

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By [Taraneh Ghajar Jerven](#)

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Washington —

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Despite the fact that integration was legal and was successful on destroyers and aircraft carriers, the Navy deemed the cost of redesigning submarines for female accommodations and privacy too costly. Since 1994, integrating submarines has been repeatedly delayed. Many, including the Alliance for National Defense, believe the delays were unnecessary, not the result of insurmountable logistical issues. They cite expenditures on Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) design where new submarines built did not reflect the requirements for gender neutral design.

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Opponents to mixed-gender crews say that the close quarters on subs would produce adverse social effects on crew members. Concerned Women for America, the largest national interest group for women, and a conservative group, says that the difficulties with harassment and fraternization for women will erode the cohesiveness of submarine crews. They also argue that national security is the Navy’s main goal, not advancing women’s careers.

And while some male crew members are supportive of the shift, there is also a Facebook group of Navy service members who voice a wide range of thin arguments.

Yet all of this outdated gender bias does not challenge women’s qualifications to perform job duties. It merely opposes mixing the genders because men are unused to it.

Women have already mastered nuclear technology in the surface environment and this provides a pool of women to jump-start the transition to the submarine force. The only way to get used to a mixed crew is to implement the policy change.

Further, there is no evidence that integrating crews will undermine national security or cause social disruption. In fact, the practice of submarine crew integration has been successful for Canada, Australia, Norway, and Sweden.

A study commissioned for NATO found that on Canadian Victoria-class submarines, “Women have been seamlessly integrated into the environment with few problems. No attempts have been made to segregate the genders, and no special provision has been made for bunking or shower facilities.” (All bunks have privacy curtains, and women use the officers’ single-person head facilities.)

My grandfather, a Navy captain, graduated from the Naval Academy in 1942 and commanded a destroyer and up to two squadrons. What many are saying now echoes his view in the 1960s: The complications of having women and men in close quarters made a mixed-gender sub unfeasible.

But it’s 50 years later. My grandfather did not imagine women serving on destroyers, which has been effectively and smoothly implemented. Nor did he probably imagine that women would be NASA astronauts living in a mixed-gender crew in tighter quarters than even a sub.

Adm. Gary Roughead, who as current chief of naval operations is responsible for implementing any new policy, says he is confident his sailors are now responsible and mature enough for mixed-gender subs. He’s right. After all, the Navy was the first branch of the armed services to enlist females.

The legacy of the US is defined by overcoming unnecessary barriers to the equality of citizens. Fifty years ago how many people thought electing a black president was possible? According to the Cambridge Dictionary, progress is defined as “the development of a society in a direction considered more beneficial than and superior to the previous level.”

If you ask someone who has experienced gender or racial discrimination, they’d tell you progress could be faster. This time around, Congress should facilitate the Navy policy change that will eliminate one of the last bastions of gender segregation.

Taraneh Ghajar Jerven is a freelance writer. She comes from a Navy family.

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