

**Moving into Sync:
the women's movement and women in the
military**

by

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Conference**

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*Abstract***Moving into Sync:
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When the passage of the Sex Discrimination Act in 1983 made the subject of women in the military a hot political issue, the women's movement in Australia remained largely unmoved by the struggles of their sisters in uniform. In some cases, there was even active opposition to the efforts of women to secure equality of opportunity within the armed services. Over the past fifteen years attitudes have gradually altered and many more women who identify as feminists are willing to take a stand in support of women's advancement within the military. In the United States, feminist ambivalence on this issue reached a high point during the Gulf War when many military mothers went into battle, precipitating a massive domestic debate which forced feminists to take a stand. In Australia, the recent landmark decision of the Chief of the Defence Force to recommend the federal government open all combat positions to women forced a similar soul-searching on the part of the women's movement here. A significant shift in attitudes was evident from this debate, and it appears that the women's movement and women in the military are, finally, marching in step.

Conference Delegates

I am very pleased to have been invited to make a contribution to this path-breaking conference.

Although I have not myself ever been directly involved in any of the services, I have found myself at various times in my career actively supporting and defending the right of women to serve, and even working directly on trying to remove obstacles to their doing so.

On occasions these efforts have led me into conflict with sections of the women's movement - of which I am a member of very long standing, my involvement going back as far as 1969 when the first Women's Liberation groups were formed in this country. At times, the women's movement, far from supporting the expansion of women's employment and training opportunities, have often opposed the movement of women into the military on pacifist grounds. This was perhaps understandable because many, if not most, of the early women's movement activists had also been involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement.

There has been, in other words, a discernible gulf between much of the women's movement and the women who have been spearheading change in the military and other uniformed services. (Although it is worth noting that there was far less articulated opposition to women in, say, the police or fire-fighting services than to women in the defence force.)

I thought the most useful contribution I could make today from my vantage point as a long-time feminist who has worked in and out of government, would be to trace the history of this gulf and to examine whether it is narrowing.

I am pleased to be able to say that I believe it is.

The women's movement and women in the military are not exactly marching shoulder to shoulder but they are nevertheless moving into sync. I believe there is today much greater empathy on the part of previously sceptical or even hostile sections of the women's movement towards the career aspiration of women in the military, and a willingness to do battle to support military women in the difficulties they encounter in the services.

I would like to illustrate this thesis by recounting three separate episodes which, I believe, exemplify the evolving attitude of the women's movement towards women in the military.

The first occurred in early 1984 when I was appointed as the Head of the Office of the Status of Women (OSW) during the Hawke government.

Federal Parliament was just passing the Sex Discrimination Act, a landmark piece of legislation that, when it was proclaimed in August 1984, for the first time, gave federal protection to women against discrimination in employment and education and a range of other circumstances because of their sex, their marital status or because of being pregnant.

The legislation was regarded as extremely controversial in some quarters and in order to get it passed, the government decided to provide certain exemptions to the most vociferous of the opponents. One of these was the defence forces.

The Act allowed the Australian Defence Forces to continue to discriminate against women in positions that were regarded as 'combat' or 'combat-related'. All other positions had to be open to women.

Regulations to the Act defined 'combat' duties as those 'requiring a person to commit, or to participate directly in the commission of, an act of violence in a time of war.'

'Combat-related duties' were defined as 'requiring a person to work in support of, and in close proximity to, a person performing combat duties, being work performed in circumstances in which the person performing the work may be killed or injured by an act of violence committed by an adversary.'

The Defence Department was required to reclassify every single designation in order to decide whether it was 'combat', 'combat-related' or whether women could be given the opportunity to compete for the position. The government was keen that this re-classification be as positive for women as possible and so I was given the job of chairing the Interdepartmental Committee on the Employment of Women in the Defence Force.

Our task was to examine every job designation - and there are thousands of them as I am sure most of you know - and to decide on their classification.

I have to say it was one of the strangest jobs I have ever been given. Talk about combat-related!

The two Defence department representatives on the Committee were men, and they were military. They wore full uniforms to every meeting, and they saw it as their brief to preserve every possible job from female encroachment.

I had not been especially militant on the issue until now. To be honest, I had never really thought about the position of women in the military, even though I had spent many years in the women's movement, and had written a book about the position of women in Australia.

But now, from my vantage point at OSW, I began to develop a wider perspective.

I learned, for instance, that a number of young women were incensed that their applications to become fighter pilots had been turned down. One of these young women wrote to Labor Senator Pat Giles, in Western Australia and Pat, although she had a long history of involvement in the peace movement, was moved to champion her cause.

It soon was obvious that the military could provide not just employment, but also skills training, for women, just as it did for men, who would not otherwise have had access to post-secondary education. Regardless of our personal views about the military, it seemed that from an equity point of view, feminists could not do other than support the efforts of women wanting to join the military.

My personal contribution to the cause became the weekly battles on the Committee.

It really was like hand to hand fighting, even if the weapons were words - although I did use some well-known bureaucratic tactics like scheduling meetings to run through lunch-time, making sure of course that I had eaten in advance, to try to wear them down, and ensuring that I sat with the window behind me so I could see their faces but mine was in shadows!

Perhaps the highlight of the battle was the time I found myself shouting at these men, arguing for the right of women to be cooks in the Army. I was amazed at myself. Arguing for women to occupy such a traditional female job. But no, it was not to be. Combat-related, they said, cooking for men on the front-line.

When the dust settled, 16,300 jobs - or 25 per cent of all positions - were declared able to be filled by women. This was a significant increase on the 8 per cent of jobs able to be filled by women before the review.

But the situation looked a lot better than it was.

Just because the position *could* be filled by women did not mean that they *would*. Two years after the review, in 1986, women occupied only 7.9 per cent of all positions in the defence forces. This was *less* than the de facto quota that had operated for women prior to the passage of the Sex Discrimination Act.

This dismal situation should have caused anger, if not outrage, amongst feminists. Especially as the Sex Discrimination Act was widely seen as a victory for the women's movement. I regret to say, however, that the position of women in the military rarely received any attention from the women's movement.

In some quarters it was an embarrassing contradiction to the pacifism of so many feminists. I also think, to be very honest, that there was an element of snobbery there too on the part of a mainly middle-class, tertiary educated movement which was happy to take up the cause of trade union women, but felt uncomfortable supporting their sisters in uniform.

The young girls who had wanted to be pilots were not even allowed to fill in an application. If anything, the Sex Discrimination Act slammed the door in their faces because it so clearly excluded women from combat positions.

It was not until 1992 that the government decided to open up some combat positions to women, enabling them to fly combat aircraft and to serve on submarines.

MY SECOND EXPERIENCE occurred in 1991 while I living in the United States.

It was the time of the Gulf War and the big story as far as the media was concerned was not so much that *women* were going to war, but that *mothers* were. There was a huge backlash.

The mainstream media was full of stories of women kissing their babies before they went off to do battle against Saddam Hussein. Even more shocking was the revelation that many mothers had requested active duty. They had actually asked to go!

In The Washington Post the influential journalist Sally Quinn (whose husband Ben Bradlee of Watergate fame happened to be the Editor) wrote that sending mothers off to war in this fashion was an example of “feminism gone awry”.

She blamed the women’s movement.

This was pretty ironic because the women’s movement was far from behind these women. In fact, most sections of the movement either remained mute - rather than criticise other women - or else came out with the ludicrous position espoused by the National Organisation for Women (NOW).

NOW seriously put forward the argument that women should be encouraged to go into the military because they would “humanise” it. They might even persuade other soldiers to lay down their arms.

This position was a far cry from the reality of women wanting to service their country, wanting to put into practice the training they had had, and wanting naturally enough to show that they were as good as the boys when it came to doing their job.

In the middle of this controversy I conducted a very illuminating interview on the subject with Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder.

Pat Schroeder was a well-known feminist and a great supporter of women, but she was also at the time chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and was conducting hearings on the subject of women, and mothers, in the military and going to combat zones.

The views she expressed in the interview would have been interesting in any forum, but what was particularly salient was that the interview was for *Ms.* magazine, the well-known feminist magazine founded by Gloria Steinem.

Now Ms. had no track record supporting women in the military, so the fact they were prepared to run an interview with Schroeder, knowing her views, was another example of the women’s movement moving towards the point of view of women in the military. (The interview was published in May 1991.)

Schroeder told me that she got “an awful lot of flack from women who normally support me about this, saying they just don't approve of my support of women in the military.”

“My jaw just kind of drops,” she went on. “And their thing is, Our image of the world is that we don’t have a military and I say, Fine. That’s the way I’d like it to be too; the only thing is that today we have one and there are people who are qualified who want to be in it. I always thought the point of feminism was for me not to impose my choice on someone. If someone wants to be a homemaker - fine. But they shouldn’t tell me I have to be one, and I shouldn’t tell them they have to be one - that’s crazy.”

In the context these were fighting words!

Schroeder was well aware that some women who had shipped out and left their husbands looking after their children, had in fact volunteered to go and only ‘fessed up after they got there that they hadn’t in fact been made to go. And she supported these women in what they had done.

“That’s right. They wanted to be part of the action - they were very excited about it.”

She went on to make the point that the US military had in fact discovered that there were more single fathers than single mothers in service, and that going to war presented a far more serious problem for men who were in charge of children than for women.

She cited the case of a man who had been court-martialled for going off to the Gulf War leaving his three children alone and unattended with only a credit card to meet their daily needs.

Yet, Schroeder pointed out, few people were calling men bad fathers for going to war. It was women, and especially mothers, who were copping the flak.

Schroeder said she intended to use her hearings to probe the extent to which the military was providing the kind of family support that all soldiers with children needed.

The other area she intended to investigate was the military’s provision for women’s sanitary needs.

She told me of the scandalous situation the sanitation packages provided to women were the same as those put together in the 40s. They included sanitary napkins instead of tampons!

Congresswoman Schroeder said she intended to ask the military women how they had fared in the Gulf War when it came to managing such things,

but she was sure that, until enlightenment prevailed and the packs were changed, she said “that must have just been a real pain for them, I'm sure.”

What a breathe of fresh air, to have a sympathetic woman heading up a committee that had the power to deal with such issues, and where the head was not afraid to ask about such so-called delicate matters.

But Schroeder was very much on her own. She had little support within the Congressional Women's Caucus about this.

“Nobody wants to touch it,” she said. “People just don't want to touch it, they don't want to talk about it because it just hits so many hot buttons.”

And not just in the United States!

The Third Example I want to talk about occurred earlier this year, in January, when it was leaked to the media that the Chief of the Defence Force was in favour of opening up all remaining position within the Australian military to women so that they could have “an equal role in the defence of their country”.

That statement certainly brought out all the conservatives who flashed all the tired old arguments as to why women couldn't fight - naturally, the old favourite that women have periods was trotted out again.

What was most interesting about the debate, from my point of view, was the way it galvanised so much of the women's movement.

The women's movement in fact was in many ways spurred to action by seeing their sisters in the military come under such conservative attack.

I monitored the responses on ausfem-polnet, a feminist email network and found the arguments from feminists in support of women in the military most interesting.

Some of the pacifist groups adopted the ingenious approach of saying they had no position on whether women should be involved in armed conflict, but that they supported the removal of one of the last two of Australia's reservations to CEDAW (the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women).

By way of background, when Australia ratified CEDAW it made two reservations: women in the military and paid maternity leave, stating it would not legislate in these two areas.

In other words, they found a feminist legal reason to agree to the ban on women in combat being fully removed without having to go through what would be a very tortuous debate about whether women *should* in fact fight.

That, I have to tell you, is a big advance in their position - and one that women in the military should take some comfort from.

Similarly, the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) took a pragmatic view.

If we have to have a military, they argued, and combat positions are where the promotions are, then women should not be excluded.

It might not sound like much to women who have been fighting the hard fight against the enemy within the armed services, but it is a definite advance on where most women's groups were in 1983 when the Sex Discrimination Act got the ball rolling.

We are still not exactly marching shoulder to shoulder, but we are no longer totally out of syn.

It is a good time for a dialogue to begin, and this conference is the perfect place to begin it.

Thank you