

## Female combatants

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Female combatants are women soldiers serving in fighting roles in uniformed or irregular military forces. Women across cultures and through time have rarely participated in war as combatants. However, when they have fought, women have performed well. Important cases include the nineteenth-century Dahomey kingdom, the Soviet Union in World War II, various irregular forces, and US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

### THE RARITY OF FEMALE WAR COMBATANTS

The most notable aspect of female war combatants is how few there have been through history. Historically, of the untold millions of combatants in the world's wars, more than 99 percent have been males.

Greek myths, and other legends, tell of whole armies of female combatants – Amazons. In the extreme, Greek myths had whole societies ruled by women (matriarchies) or even societies of only women. However, no solid evidence backs up any such claims. Kleinbaum (1983) argues that patriarchal societies create myths about Amazons to be conquered and tamed, in order to reinforce the men's own masculinity.

Currently, the several million members of designated combat forces in uniformed armies worldwide are more than 99 percent male, which is also the historical norm. Expanding to the more than twenty million military personnel worldwide (including nurses, cooks, and other non-combat specialties), still well over 95 percent are men.

Despite this overall rarity of women in combat, many instances have occurred in which women have fought in wars – just not

nearly as many as men. Small numbers of women have fought in most wars, under various circumstances – sometimes disguised as men, sometimes not. And in a few cases, larger numbers of women have participated as war fighters, though never the majority. Finally, women in US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan have expanded women's roles in combat in recent years. These cases offer evidence to evaluate the performance of female combatants in war.

### DAHOMEY KINGDOM

The most important historical case of female combatants is the Dahomey kingdom, a West African slaving state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (today's Benin). It provides the only case of a long-term, standing regular army with as many as one-third women making up its ranks. Dahomey was extremely warlike, brutal, and suffered a chronic manpower shortage because of war and slaving losses. The king organized all-women units parallel to those of the men, but officially tied directly to the king and living in the palace. The women trained and fought just like the men, and their bravery and speed turned the tide of important battles. The addition of women to Dahomey's army clearly increased its military strength. It was the predominant military power in its region. Yet others did not copy the model.

### WORLD WAR I

In World War I, women supported industrialized warfare in new ways, incidentally breaking the pre-war international feminist solidarity against war. The first women officially joined the US and British militaries, although in non-combat roles.



**Plate 33** Kady Brownell, called the “Heroine of Newbern” after risking her life for her fellow Union soldiers in the American Civil War, ca. 1860s (Bartlett 2001). Bettman Archive/Corbis.

Individuals such as Englishwoman Flora Sandes took part in fighting. One of these, Maria Botchkareva of Russia, went on to lead a “Battalion of Death” with several hundred women who fought in one battle, but served mainly (though unsuccessfully) to shame men into fighting after morale and discipline had broken down.

## THE SOVIET UNION IN WORLD WAR II

In World War II, women participated in new combat roles, including operating

anti-aircraft guns in several countries. In the Soviet Union, women made up about 8 percent of the Red Army and fought as front-line nurse/fighters, as pilots, and as anti-aircraft gunners. Several women’s air regiments included one, the so-called night witches, that flew cheap, highly combustible biplanes in a racetrack pattern to bomb German front lines by night from temporary forward air strips. Elsewhere, a special school trained Soviet women as snipers. Ideology and manpower shortages seem to explain women’s high participation in the Soviet case. There and elsewhere, women combatants also played a propaganda role as symbols of the national will to win.

## IRREGULAR FORCES

Historically, and still today, women have fought more often in irregular forces such as guerillas, militias, and terrorist groups than in regular uniformed armies. In these contexts, lines blur between military and civilian life. Some such armies also themselves hold egalitarian ideological beliefs that support women as combatants. Women’s ability to appear unthreatening and to hide behind laws protecting civilians have made them valuable assets as spies and suicide bombers, among other roles. Here again, propaganda sometimes emphasizes women’s fighting roles as a symbol of unity and sacrifice, such as in the popular image of a Vietnamese woman guerilla with a rifle in one arm and a baby in the other.

These forms of women’s participation in irregular war date back far in history. Excavations at a Sauromatian site (fourth century BCE to second century CE) near the Russia–Kazakhstan border (Davis–Kimball 1997) found seven graves of females with iron swords or daggers, bronze arrowheads, and whetstones to sharpen the weapons, suggesting that they were warriors. The

types of graves overall suggested that something like 90 percent of the men and 15–20 percent of the women fought in war.

In the civil wars of the twenty-first century, women combatants are found widely – albeit as a minority of fighters – in such cases as Sri Lanka’s Tamil Tigers (a third women and pioneers of women suicide bombers), West African rebels, Indian and Nepalese Maoists, Palestinian militants, and al-Qaeda. Women combatants’ ongoing propaganda value is again demonstrated by a statement from al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, “Are there no men, so that we have to recruit women?” (Dickey 2005).

#### CONTEMPORARY UNIFORMED ARMIES

In recent years, women have participated in regular combat roles in a number of countries. Leaving aside the United States for a moment, 15 of 24 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries have dropped gender restrictions, including on combat. Canada, Denmark, Norway, and France lifted restrictions earliest. Typically, women integrate first and fastest in aviation (where a smaller build uses less cockpit space), then in naval forces (except submarines), and most slowly in armor and infantry. Data from 2007–2008 show that women as a percentage of military forces vary from below 3 percent in Turkey, Poland, and Italy to more than 15 percent in Hungary, Latvia, and Slovenia, and around 15 percent in the United States, Canada, and France (Obradovic 2009).

In Israel, where (contrary to popular belief) women were barred from all designated combat roles until recent years, most restrictions have been lifted, but numbers are also few. In Eritrea, where women had fought in irregular units in the secession

from Ethiopia, women remained integrated in regular uniformed infantry during the subsequent trench warfare against Ethiopia. Historically, small numbers of women have dressed as men and fought in uniformed armies, sometimes being found out only on death or serious injury, and other times being buried on the battlefield with their gender undiscovered.

In today’s peacekeeping forces, whether from the United Nations (UN), European Union, or African Union, women are edging into combat roles after a near-absence in previous decades. For example, a women’s combat battalion from Ghana served in Liberia in 2009. The UN Security Council has encouraged women’s greater participation in peacekeeping, but contributing countries still determine the composition of the forces.

#### US FORCES IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

The United States, the world’s preeminent military force, has successfully integrated women into the military on a larger scale than ever in history. Some 15 percent of military personnel are women. Most are in healthcare and administration, traditionally feminized occupations, but a growing number have participated in combat. In aviation, where no gender restrictions apply, US women have flown combat missions in Serbia (1999), Afghanistan (since 2001), and Iraq (since 2003). Women serve on combat naval surface ships as well, though not quite yet in submarines.

In the Iraq War, the blurring of front lines in a counterinsurgency war brought US women into combat repeatedly. Military police, an occupational specialty open to women, patrolled Iraqi streets shooting machine guns from the back of Humvees. Military commanders also realized they

needed women in the front ranks of US combat units' raiding parties in Iraq, to allay civilians' fears of the male soldiers and to search women. US women have also participated in combat against Iraqi insurgents when their transport units came under attack. The first Silver Star medals for combat awarded to women since World War II went to US soldiers in Iraq. By 2009, 10,000 US women served in Iraq, where more than a hundred had died to date.

In Afghanistan, 4,000 US women soldiers (as of 2009) had also played an important role in interactions with civilian populations, an aspect of the war emphasized in recent counterinsurgency strategies. In strictly gender-segregated societies, US women soldiers form an indispensable link to local women who may provide intelligence to head off trouble planned by their male relatives. Throughout the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences, the US military has found women combatants in their present roles quite effective (Raddatz and Gorman 2009). Feared results such as damage to unit cohesion in gender-integrated units have not materialized, although sexual harassment within the ranks remains a problem and some women – like their male counterparts – have developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of combat exposure. The overall success of US women soldiers in wartime, and in expanded combatant roles, has dampened political controversy in Washington about women's participation in the military.

## CONCLUSION

Women have fought in wars rarely, but effectively on numerous occasions. Women can kill at close range or as snipers, endure the hardships of battle,

and keep their wits under fire. Given this record, it is puzzling that so few states have ever tried using women combatants. The reason may involve protecting the norms of masculinity that often motivate men to participate in war (Goldstein 2001).

SEE ALSO: Eritrea–Ethiopia Conflict (1998–2000); Gulf Wars (1990–1991, 2003–present); Joan of Arc (1412–1431); Militia; Sri Lankan Civil War; Women and war.

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