

# Women in the U.S. Military: Growing Share, Distinctive Profile

*By Eileen Patten and Kim Parker*

The women who serve in today's military differ from the men who serve in a number of ways. Compared with their male counterparts, a greater share of military women are black and a smaller share are married. Also, women veterans of the post-9/11 era are less likely than men to have served in combat and more likely to be critical of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In other ways, however, military women are not different from military men: they are just as likely to be officers; they joined the armed services for similar reasons; and post-9/11 veterans of both sexes have experienced a similar mix of struggles and rewards upon returning to civilian life.

Since 1973, when the United States military ended conscription and established an all-volunteer force, the number of women serving on active duty has risen dramatically. The share of women among the enlisted ranks has increased seven-fold, from 2% to 14%, and the share among commissioned officers has quadrupled, from 4% to 16%.

Department of Defense policy prohibits the assignment of women to any "unit below brigade level whose primary mission is direct ground combat."<sup>1</sup> While this policy excludes women from being assigned to infantry, special operations commandos and some other roles, female members of the armed forces may still find themselves in situations that require combat action, such as defending their units if they come under attack.<sup>2</sup>

This report explores the changing role of women in the military using several data sources. Two Department of Defense publications — *Population Representation in the Military Forces, FY2010* and *Demographics 2010: Profile of the Military Community* — provide the overall trends in military participation by gender, as well as demographic and occupational profiles of male and female military personnel.

The report also draws on data from two surveys of military veterans: a Pew Research Center survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,853 veterans conducted July 28-Sept. 4, 2011, and the July 2010 Current Population Survey (CPS) Veterans Supplement (n=9,739 veterans).

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<sup>1</sup> See "[Report to the White House Council on Women and Girls.](#)" Department of Defense, September 1, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> According to military sociologist Brenda Moore, the nature of the post-9/11 conflicts against guerrilla insurgencies "blurs the distinction between front-line and rear areas." [NPR interview](#), Oct. 1, 2007.

The CPS data provides information about the overall female veteran population (n=636). The Pew Research survey data provides insight into the experiences of post-9/11 female veterans (n=135), including the mix of benefits and burdens they see resulting from their service. The analysis of the Pew Research survey should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes. However, any differences highlighted in the report are statistically significant.

## Key Findings of the Report

- **Growing Presence.** From 1973 to 2010 the number of active-duty enlisted women in the military has grown from about 42,000 to 167,000. Over that same period, the enlisted force as a whole has seen a decrease of about 738,000 service members.
- **Ranks.** While a smaller number of women than men serve overall, a slightly greater proportion among the ranks of women are commissioned officers, compared with the share of men who are officers (17% vs. 15%).
- **Demographics.** The current active-duty female force is more racially diverse than the male force. Nearly one-third (31%) of active-duty women are black compared with only 16% of men, and a smaller share of active-duty women than men are white (53% vs. 71%). While military women are less likely than their male counterparts to be married (46% vs. 58%), those women who do marry are much more likely than men to wed someone who is also in the active-duty military (48% vs. 7%).
- **Combat.** Among living veterans from any era, only 15% of women served in combat, compared with 35% of men. Since the 1990s, changes in military policies and a decade-long conflict have contributed to an increase in combat exposure among women, from 7% among pre-1990 female veterans to 24% of post-1990 female veterans.
- **Re-entry.** The Pew Research survey finds that women veterans are just as likely as men to experience the struggles and benefits of service upon discharge — fully half say they experienced strains in family relations and 42% feel they have suffered from post-traumatic stress. On the other hand, 97% feel proud of their service.
- **Opinions of the Wars.** The Pew Research survey also finds that women veterans are more critical than their male counterparts of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—fully 63% say the Iraq war was not worth fighting and 54% say Afghanistan has not been worth it (compared with 47% and 39% of male veterans, respectively). Among the

general public, by contrast, there are no significant differences by gender in the share who say the post-9/11 wars were not worth fighting.

## About the Data

### The Veterans Survey

The attitudes of post-9/11 veterans reported in this study are based on a nationally representative sample of 1,853 men and women who served in the military and are no longer on active duty. The sample included 712 post-9/11 veterans — 135 of whom were women and 577 of whom were men. This analysis should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes. However, any differences highlighted in the report are statistically significant.

The margin of sampling error for results based on the entire sample of veterans is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points; the margin of sampling error for those who served after 9/11 is plus or minus 5.7 percentage points. Among the post-9/11 group, the margin of sampling error for women is plus or minus 12.7 and for men is plus or minus 6.3.

Veterans were interviewed by telephone or via the internet from July 28 to Sept. 4, 2011. For a more detailed description of the survey methodology, see "[War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era: The Military-Civilian Gap](#)".

### Demographic Data

The demographic and occupational profile of the active-duty military from 1973 to 2010 is primarily based on the latest available data published by the Department of Defense. Trends over time and data on the characteristics of the military came from [Demographics 2010: Profile of the Military Community](#) and [Population Representation in the Military Services, FY2010](#).

## A SNAPSHOT OF ACTIVE-DUTY WOMEN

The numbers of women on active duty in the military have risen dramatically since the beginning of the all-volunteer force. The number serving as enlisted personnel has grown from 42,278 in 1973 to 166,729 in 2010, and the number serving as commissioned officers has increased from 12,750 to 35,341 over that same period. At the same time, the size of the military as a whole has been declining steadily. In 1973, there were more than 1.9 million enlisted personnel; today, there are less than 1.2 million.

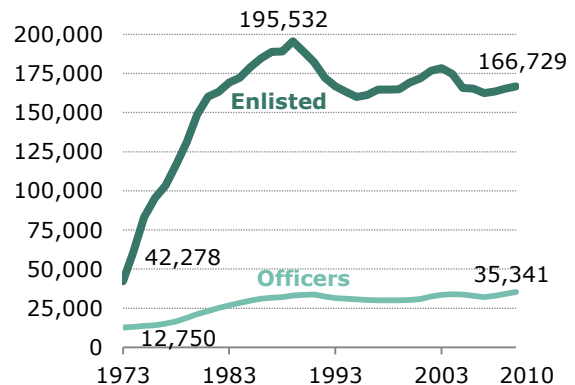
Women in this decade have made up a much greater share of the active-duty military than they have at any time in U.S. history. Among the ranks of the enlisted, 14% are now women (up from 2% in 1973), and among commissioned officers, 16% are now women, compared with 4% in 1973.

As the share of women in the military increases, so does the share of veterans who are women. The 2010 Current Population Survey estimates that there are just over 22 million veterans, almost 1.8 million of whom are women (8%); and among the estimated 2.2 million post-9/11 veterans, more than 400,000 (19%) are women.

Today's women veterans have served in every era dating back to World War II, when women in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) and other voluntary divisions served in positions other than nurses for the first time.

### Women's Growing Presence, 1973-2010

Number of female enlisted, commissioned officers



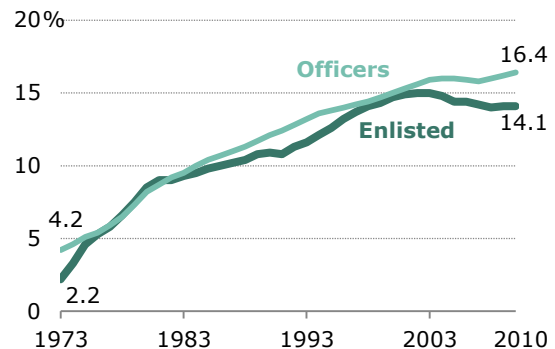
Note: Middle data label for enlisted is the highest number of women, 1989. Trend for officers includes only commissioned officers, not warrant or non-commissioned officers.

Source: Department of Defense *Population Representation in the Military Forces, FY2010*.

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### Women's Growing Share, 1973-2010

% of enlisted, commissioned officers who are women



Source: Department of Defense *Population Representation in the Military Forces, FY2010*.

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The majority of female veterans (53%) served sometime during the quarter century between Vietnam and Sept. 11, 2001. Of these women, 27% served between the end of the Vietnam conflict and July 1990, and 26% served between August 1990 and 9/11. Some 23% of women veterans have served in the post-9/11 era.

Women who serve in the military today differ in some ways from the men that they serve alongside. The current active-duty female force is more racially diverse than the male force. Today's military women are less likely than men to be married and less likely to serve in a combat zone. However, in many ways the experiences they have are similar to their male counterparts: they are just as likely to be officers and they have similar experiences re-entering and adjusting to civilian life once discharged.

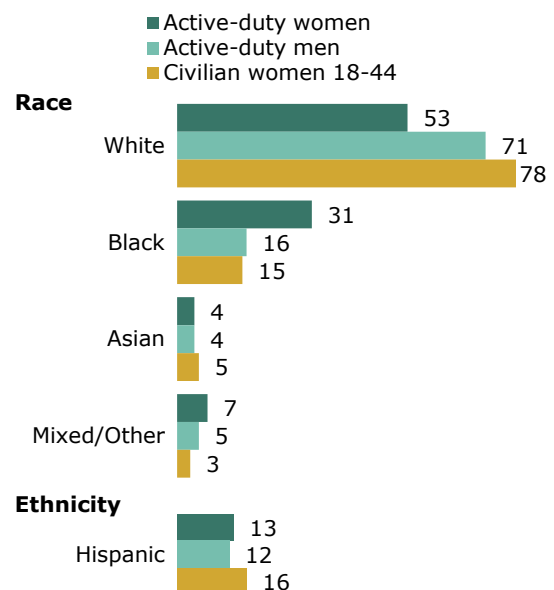
## Race and Ethnicity of Military Women

There are a few key demographic differences between women and men in the military. The most prominent among these is the racial compositions of the two groups. While 71% of active-duty men are white (including white Hispanics), only about half of active-duty women (53%) are white. The share of white women in the military is also significantly smaller than their proportion in the civilian female population ages 18-44 (78%).

More than three-in-ten (31%) military women are black (including black Hispanics). This is almost twice the share of active-duty men who are black (16%), as well as more than twice the proportion of civilian women ages 18-44 who are black (15%). In addition, more women in the active-duty force than men in the active-duty force and civilian women ages 18-44 are of mixed racial background or some other race.<sup>3</sup>

## Minority Women in the Military

% enlisted who are ...



Notes: All racial groups represent their Hispanic and non-Hispanic components combined. Hispanics are any race. "Unknown" race not shown.

Source: Department of Defense *Population Representation in the Military Forces, FY2010*.

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<sup>3</sup> This "Mixed/Other" group includes American Indians or Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders.

The share of Hispanics among women and men in the armed forces is similar (13% vs. 12%, respectively), and the share of military women who are Hispanic is smaller than that of Hispanic women ages 18-44 in the U.S. civilian population (16%). But the number of Hispanics enlisting in the active-duty force each year has risen significantly over the last decade. In 2003, Hispanic women and men made up 11.5% of the new enlistees to the military; just seven years later, in 2010, they made up 16.9% of non-prior service enlisted accessions.<sup>4</sup>

## Marriage Rates of Active-Duty Women

Among active-duty women in the military, being married is less common than it is for active-duty men. Only 46% of active-duty women are married compared with 58% of active-duty men.

While military women's marriage rate is the same as that of their civilian counterparts, men in the military are much more likely than civilian men to be married. Fully 58% of men in the active-duty military are married, while only 48% of civilian men ages 18-44 are married. For women, 46% of both active-duty military women and civilian women ages 18-44 are married.

Among those active-duty women who are married, a striking difference arises between military women and men. Almost half of all married military women (48%) have wed a fellow service member, while the share of men in dual-military marriages is only 7%.

Not only are active-duty women more likely to be unmarried, but they are also more likely than active-duty men to be single parents. While 12% of military women are single mothers, only 4% of military men are single dads.

### Military Women and Marriage

*% of active-duty women, men who are married*

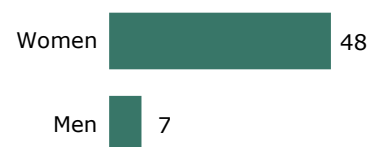


Source: Department of Defense Demographics 2010: Profile of the Military Community

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### Marrying in the Ranks

*% of married active-duty in dual-military marriages*



Source: Department of Defense Demographics 2010: Profile of the Military Community

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<sup>4</sup> 2003 was chosen because it was the year the Department of Defense changed the way they reported ethnicity.

## Where and How Women Serve

In addition to the demographic differences, military women and men differ in their choice of service branch, occupation and combat experience.

Similar shares of men and women currently serve in the Army, which is the largest active-duty branch of the military, and in the Navy. But women are more likely than men to be in the Air Force; nearly one-third (31%) of military women are in the Air Force compared with 22% of men.

On the other hand, women are much less likely than men to be in the Marine Corps — only 7% of military women are Marines, compared with 16% of men. In other words, less than half as many women as men joining the military choose the Marines.

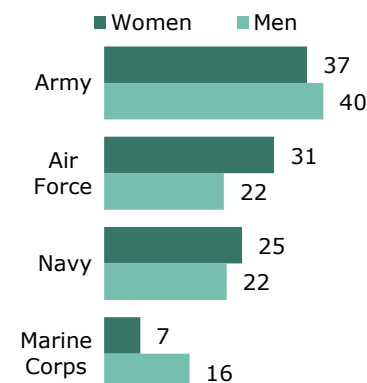
While the overall number and share of women and men in the Air Force and Marines differ, of those women and men who are part of these branches, their proportions among the top ranks are similar.

In the armed forces as a whole, a slightly greater proportion of women than men are commissioned officers (17% vs. 15%, respectively). This advantage largely plays out in the Army, where 18% of women are commissioned officers, compared with 13% of men. The proportions of commissioned officers among men and women are equal in the Air Force and Navy, and nearly equal in the Marine Corps (9% vs. 10% of men).

Though women and men advance in the military at similar rates, there are differences in their occupational roles. Most notably, female veterans are much less likely than their male counterparts to have served in a combat or war zone during

## Branches of Military

*Of women, men, % by branch*



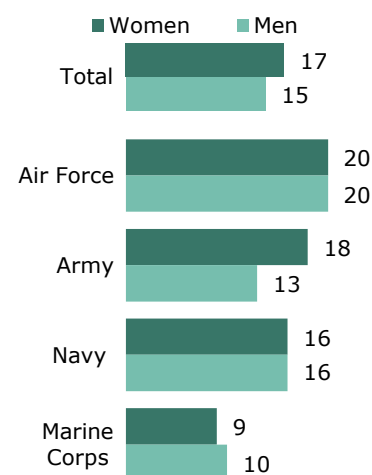
Note: Percents include enlisted members and officers.

Source: Department of Defense *Population Representation in the Military Forces, FY2010*.

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## Share of Officers

*Of women, men, % who are commissioned officers*



Source: Department of Defense *Population Representation in the Military Forces, FY2010*.

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their time in the service (15% of all women veterans vs. 35% of men).<sup>5</sup>

This mismatched experience arises largely because of the differences among occupational roles for military women and men.

Occupations in infantry are dominated by men: while 19% of servicemen are in the infantry, gun crews or are seamen, only 3% of servicewomen are in these roles. The ongoing prohibition against women serving in ground units where combat is the primary mission plays a part in the skewed distribution of these infantry roles.<sup>6</sup>

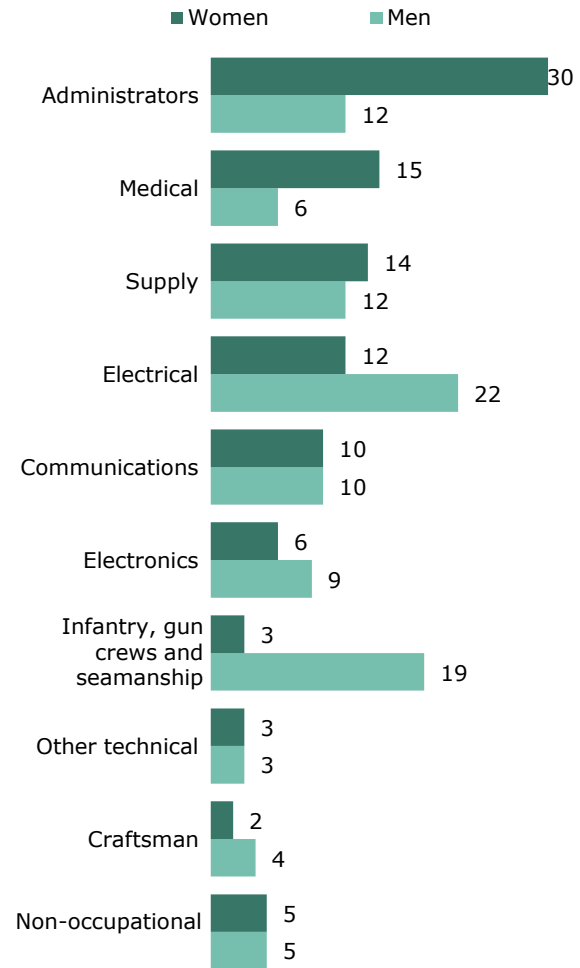
In the early 1990s, the Department of Defense changed its policies in a way that allowed women to serve in a greater variety of combat-related roles, such as flying in combat aircraft and serving on combat ships. This has led to a sharp rise in the share of female veterans who have served in combat zones — from 7% in pre-1990 eras, to nearly a quarter (24%) among those who served since 1990.

There are several other differences in the occupational distribution of men and women in the military.

Active-duty women are much more heavily concentrated in administrative and medical roles than are active-duty men. A plurality of

## Occupational Roles in the Military

% of ... in each role



Note: Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Source: Department of Defense *Population Representation in the Military Forces, FY2010*.

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<sup>5</sup> The CPS asks, "Did you EVER serve in a combat or war zone? Persons serving in a combat or war zone often receive combat zone tax exclusion, Imminent Danger Pay, or Hostile Fire Pay."

<sup>6</sup> The Department of Defense reports that over 92% of specialties in the military are open to women, but they are prohibited in "any unit below brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct ground combat." See ["Report to the White House Council on Women and Girls."](#) Department of Defense, September 1, 2009.



women in the military (30%) are in administrative positions, compared with only 12% of men. And while only 6% of men in the military hold medical roles, 15% of women have these types of jobs.

Occupational roles in the electrical field are the only jobs other than infantry that are overwhelmingly dominated by men. While 22% of men are in electrical positions, only 12% of women serve the same roles.

## POST-9/11 FEMALE VETERANS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES

The following attitudinal analyses come from a nationally-representative Pew Research survey of 1,853 military veterans, including 712 veterans who served in the period after Sept. 11, 2001. The survey was conducted from mid- to late-summer 2011. Among this sample of veterans, 135 female post-9/11 veterans were surveyed. Though caution should be taken in analyzing such a small sample, all differences reported are statistically significant.

### Why They Joined

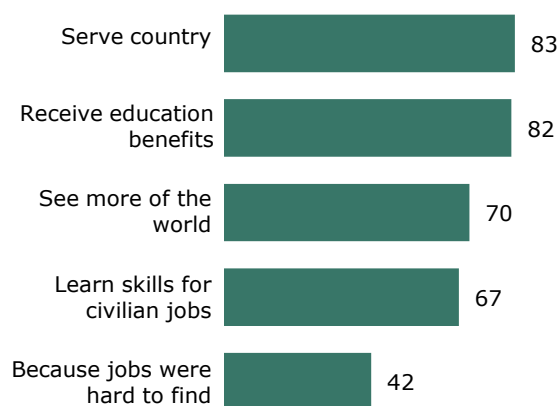
What compels young American women to join the armed forces? The answer is, to a large extent, the same things that compel young American men to join. In almost all aspects surveyed, the women's reasons for joining the military were not significantly different from the men's reasons.

More than eight-in-ten post-9/11 female veterans say they joined to serve their country or receive education benefits (83% and 82%, respectively). Fully 70% say they joined to see more of the world and almost as many (67%) say they joined to gain job skills.

However, there is one key difference in the reasons that men and women joined the military. Some 42% of female veterans say they joined the military because jobs were hard to find, compared with one-quarter of men.

### Reasons They Joined

*% of women who say they joined to ...*



Notes: Based on post-9/11 female veterans, n=135.

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### Women Join in Tough Economic Times

*% saying they joined the military because jobs were hard to find*



Note: Based on post-9/11 veterans who are women, n=135; men=562.

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## Returning from the Wars

Many of the experiences of female veterans from the post-9/11 military differ from those of men – they are less likely to have served in combat (30% vs. 57% of men)<sup>7</sup>, more likely to have never been deployed away from their permanent duty station (30% vs. 12% of men) and less likely to have served with someone who was killed while performing their duties in the military (35% vs. 50% of men).

At the same time, however, they are equally likely to have had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences while serving (47% vs. 42% of men), and their transition back into civilian life has been equally tough. More than four-in-ten female post-9/11 veterans (43%) say their readjustment to civilian life after their military service was very or somewhat difficult (along with 45% of men).

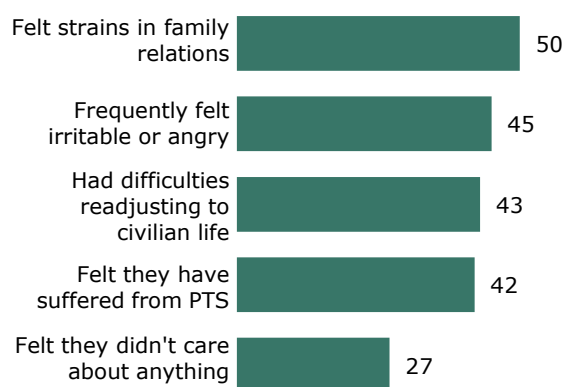
Furthermore, women are about as likely as men to report that they feel they have suffered from post-traumatic stress (42% vs. 35% of men), that they have frequently felt irritable or angry (45% vs. 47%), and that they have felt they didn't care about anything (27% vs. 33%) since they left the service. They are also as likely as men to say they have experienced strains in their family relationships since their discharge from the military (50% vs. 48%).

Female veterans are also just as likely as their male counterparts to say they have experienced the positive benefits of military service. Fully 80% of women say they have appreciated life more since they were discharged from the service (83% of men say this). In addition, 97% say they feel proud of their service and 91% have had someone thank them for their military service (compared with 96% and 92% of men, respectively).

Female veterans and male veterans are equally likely to feel their military experience has paid off for them personally and professionally. Some 79% of women veterans say their military

### Struggles of Re-entry

*% of post-9/11 women veterans who say they ...*



Note: Based on post-9/11 female veterans, n=135.

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<sup>7</sup> This number, as did other combat analysis in this report, comes from the CPS 2010 veterans supplement. For post-9/11 women veterans, n=128; for men, n=504.

experience has helped them get ahead in life and nearly three-quarters (74%) feel the military was useful in terms of preparing them for a job or career (as do 73% and 71% of men, respectively).

In addition to seeing it as a learning experience, female veterans see their service as a time of self-development. Fully 93% of women say their military experience was useful in helping them grow and mature as a person (along with the same share of men), and 87% of women say their military experience was useful in building their self-confidence, as do 91% of men.

More than three-quarters (78%) of women veterans say they would advise a young person close to them to join the military. This is similar to the share of men who would advise this (82%).

## View on the Wars

Yet while they're proud and thankful of their service, post-9/11 women veterans are critical of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. When asked whether they thought the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been "worth fighting," 63% of female veterans say that the war in Iraq was not worth fighting and 54% say the same of the war in Afghanistan.

Here, the views of military women differ from their male counterparts. Among male veterans, less than half (47%) were critical of the Iraq war and only 39% were critical of the war in Afghanistan.

This gender gap is not as apparent among the general public. In a Pew Research survey conducted Sept. 1-15, 2011, men and women as a whole expressed similar views about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with narrow majorities of both saying the wars were not worth fighting.

## Benefits of Service

*% of post-9/11 women veterans who say their military experience was useful in ...*

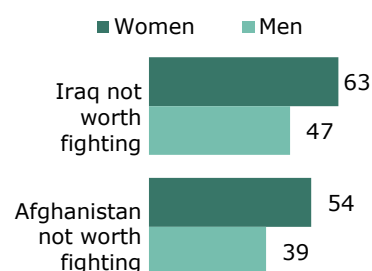


Note: Based on post-9/11 female veterans, n=135.

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## Women Weigh in on Wars

*% of post-9/11 veterans saying ...*



Question wording: "All in all, considering the costs to the United States versus the benefits to the United States, do you think the war in (Iraq/Afghanistan) has been worth fighting, or not?"

Note: Based on post-9/11 veterans who are women, n=135; men=577.

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