

How the US ‘war on woke’ and women risks weakening its own military capability

The Conversation - Published: May 1, 2025 9.10pm BST by Bethan Greener

With US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth’s “proud” cancellation this week of the military’s Women, Peace and Security (WPS) program, the “war on woke” has found its latest frontier – war itself.

Stemming from a United Nations Security Council resolution in 2000, the WPS initiative aimed to¹ increase the participation of women in public institutions, including in the security sector and in peace-making roles.

- 5 The WPS agenda aims to better understand how women, men, boys and girls experience war, peace and security differently. It increases operational effectiveness and supports the underlying goal of gender equality, described by the UN as the “number one predictor of peace”.

In the military context, it emphasises the need to increase the participation of women and to better protect non-combatant women in war, particularly from the prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence.

- 10 The decision to end the program as part of a wider war on diversity, equity and inclusion seems to assume² national security and military power are incompatible with the promotion of racial and gender equality.

In other words, it assumes certain types of people aren’t really cut out to be “warfighters”. And it asserts that anything other than basic skill³ (such as weapons handling) undermines readiness and ability in warfare.

History and the available evidence suggest both ideas are wrong.

- 15 **The archetypal warrior** envisaged by Hegseth and others is one who relies on⁴ very traditional concepts of what constitutes a warrior and who that might be: not female, definitely not transgender, ideally also not gay.

Recent bans on transgender personnel in the US military, the removal of **mandatory mental resilience training**, and the “disappearance” from US museums and memorials of the records of the military contribution of women and minorities, reinforce these ideas.

- 20 The ideal soldier, according to the new doctrine, is straight, white, physically fit, stoic and male. Yet people of all stripes have served their countries ably and with honour.

Military service is allocated a privileged kind of status in society, despite (or perhaps because of) the ultimate sacrifice it can entail⁵. That status has long been **the preserve of men**, often of a particular class or ethnicity.

- 25 But women and minorities around the world have fought for the right to enter the military, often as part of broader campaigns for greater equality within society in general.

But there remains resistance to these “**interlopers**”. No matter their individual capabilities, women are painted as too physically weak, as a threat to combat unit cohesion, or a liability because of their particular health needs.

- 30 Women, in particular, are often perceived as being too emotional or lacking authority for military command. Minorities are seen as requiring distracting rules about cultural sensitivity, presenting language challenges, or are stereotyped as not cut out for leadership.

¹ Has as a goal, *vise à*

² suppose

³ ability

⁴ Depends on, here : uses as preconception

⁵ require

Chapter 2: Trump 2.0

But problem solving – a key military requirement – is best tackled⁶ with a range of views and approaches. Research from the business world shows diverse teams are more successful, including delivering higher financial returns.

35 At a more granular level, we also know that minority groups have often outperformed other military units, as exemplified by the extraordinary feats of the New Zealand Māori Pioneer Battalion in World War I and the 28th Māori Battalion in World War II.

Women, too, have proved themselves many times over, most recently in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As well as matching the skills of their male counterparts⁷, they also had different, useful approaches to roles such as **intelligence gathering** in conflict zones.

40 The competence of military personnel is not determined by sex, gender, sexuality or ethnicity. Rather, competence is determined by a combination of learned skills, training, education, physical ability, mental agility, resilience, experience, interpersonal skills and leadership qualities.

Any suggestion that military units are best served by being made up of only heterosexual **men with “alpha” tendencies** is undermined by the evidence. In fact, a monocultural, hypermasculine military may increase the potential for harassment, bullying or worse.

Modern military roles also involve a much wider range of skills than the traditional and stereotypically male infantry tasks of digging, walking with a pack, firing guns and killing an enemy.

In modern warfare, personnel may also need to engage in “hearts and minds” counterinsurgency, or in “grey zone” tactics, where specialisations in intelligence, cyber or drone piloting are more highly prized. Militaries are also much more likely to be deployed to non-warfighting roles, such as humanitarian aid and disaster relief⁸.

This isn’t to say “controlled aggression” and other traditionally **alpha-male attributes** don’t have their place. But national military strategies increasingly stress⁹ the need to train ethical and compassionate soldiers to successfully carry out government objectives.

55 The evolution of war requires the evolution of the military forces that fight them. The cancellation of the Women, Peace and Security program in the US threatens to put a stop to this process, at least in that country.

Despite Pete Hegseth’s claim to be increasing “warfighting” capability, then, there is a real chance the move will decrease operational effectiveness, situational awareness and problem solving in conflict situations.

Far from being peripheral, the Women, Peace and Security program is central to the future of all military activity, and to developing conceptions of war, peace and security. Hegseth’s “proud moment” looks less like winning a “war on woke” and more like a retreat from an understanding of the value a diverse military has created.

1. Vocabulary

Explain these words and expressions: “The archetypal warrior” (l.15), “mandatory mental resilience training” (l.17), “the preserve of men” (l.23), “interlopers” (l.26), “intelligence gathering” (l.40), “men with “alpha” tendencies” (l.44-45)/ “alpha-male attributes” (l.52)

2. What is the WPS? What happened to it?

3. What is the writer’s opinion about this measure and what are her arguments?

⁶ Dealt with

⁷ Equivalent persons

⁸ Assistance

⁹ Accentuate