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Dr. Suad Joseph
General Editor

Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Women and Gender Studies, University of
California, Davis

<http://sjoseph.ucdavis.edu/ewic>

Military: Women's Participation: United States

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By Shareda Hosein

Women have served on the battlefield as nurses, water bear-ers, cooks, laundresses, and saboteurs since the revolutionary war. They held no official positions in the military but worked as civilians serving their country's military needs until the establishment of the Army Nurse Corps in 1901 and the Navy Nurse Corps in 1908. During the First World War (1917–18), the first formal military positions were held by 21,480 army nurses and more later served in the Quartermaster's Corps. The Reorganization Act (1920) allowed women to hold "relative rank" from second lieutenant to major (but without rights and privileges).

In 1942, the Army Nurse Corps changed to the Women's Auxillary Army Corps (WAAC) and in 1943 to the Women's Army Corps (WAC), which included the Women's Air force Service Pilots (WASP) who flew as civil service pilots. WASPs flew stateside missions as ferriers, test pilots, and anti-aircraft artillery trainers. The navy also recruited women into its Navy Women's Reserve, called Women Accepted for Vol-unteer Emergency Service (WAVES) (Highlights of Women in the Military). In 1978, the women's corps were terminated and women were integrated with the regular services. The number of women increased from 1.6 percent of the total United States military force in 1973 to 15 percent in 2003 (Manning and Wight 2003, 10). The majority of combat related positions are still off-limits to women, although women are trained to defend themselves and their units. During Desert Storm in 1991, approximately 41,000 women, including Muslims, were integrated in many combat support positions in the theatre of operation in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Americans became alarmed about their women supporting the combat forces who were within close proximity of the front lines.

Little information has been collected about Muslim women in the military because their story is still unfolding. There is no reference to them in any books containing information about women in the United States military but more is written about Muslim Women in military services in other countries. The United States military statistics refer to its personnel by gender and ethnic background rather than by religion, which is counted from the perspective of pastoral and religious support. The information for this topic comes primarily from firsthand experience, interviews with women who have served or are serving in the military, and conversations with Muslim chaplains in the military.

It is still uncertain when the first Muslim women joined the United States military. The first evidence found through a survey was of an American Muslim woman born of Lebanese parents from Quincy, Massachusetts who joined the Navy Reserves in 1958, served approximately two years, and later resigned. She joined out of pride because five of her brothers had served in either the Second World War or the Korean War and she felt it was her patriotic duty to do the same. The end of the Vietnam War and the draft opened the way for more women to join the military, most of them African-American, and some immigrants or Americans born of immigrant parents. The statistics available show the largest percentage of the Muslim population in the military now to be African-Americans, followed by South Asians, Arabs, and Caucasians. From the 1970s to the present, the Muslim population increased and gained acceptance and was given space on the military bases to use for worship, Islamic education, and other religious activities. Awareness of

Muslim women in the military increased as a result of stories of service women requesting to wear the hijab as part of their uniform, and the tragic events of 11 September 2001 with the resulting media exposure of Muslim women in Afghanistan and Arab countries.

Statistics

According to statistics from June 2003 from the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) Manpower Section, there are 1.4 million military personnel on active duty and out of this number there are approximately 4,164 personnel (male and female) or 0.3 percent who have declared Islam as their religion on their personnel records. The American Muslim Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Council states that there are approximately 15,000 Muslims in the military, which constitutes approximately 1.1 percent of the total force (Barber 2003), of which the female Muslim population is approximately 533 women, or 0.03 percent on active duty.

A number of factors account for the difference in the numbers of Muslims in the military. New recruits at basic training may not state a religious preference out of fear of being singled out or harassed because of their faith, and fail to update their records at a later date. A few women converted to Islam while in the military and did not update their records, and some who say they are Muslim do not want it to be in their records. The record will reflect a "no religious preference" if the records are not updated. The OSD maintains that about 70 percent of military personnel do declare a faith (Akhtar 1998).

The chart below shows the growth of the female Muslim personnel in the active services of the military from 1995 to 2003 and the Reserves in 2003.

Female Muslim Population in the U.S. Military

Service	1995	2003	Reserves	2003
Army	197	257	Army	196
			Air National Guards	16
Air Force	80	132	Air Force	5
Navy	70	117	Naval	9
Marines	23	27	Marines	11
Total	370	533	Total	237

Education

Many Muslim women in the military utilize the education benefits and work on successfully achieving a bachelor's degree. Since the 1970s, women have been required to have a high school diploma (all women's jobs required this) and be in good physical condition to join the military. Their male counterparts were required to have only an eighth-grade education, because of the shortage of men joining the military after the end of the draft, and the assumption that combat positions do not require a high school diploma.

Women were not allowed the free education at the military academies in order to be commissioned as officers until 1976 when Congress changed the rules. There are no records of any Muslim females graduates from the academies. Women were commissioned through other sources, such as the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and the Officer Candidate School (OCS) starting in 1972. There are a few Muslim women who were commissioned from these sources.

Also, the Equal Rights Amendments of 1972 afforded women the opportunity to have a career within the military with equal pay for equal work.

Why Muslim women join the military, stay in the military, and/or leave the military

From the 1970s until the present, women have been recruited to join the military with benefits of college tuition, military training that could be transferred into a civilian career, travel opportunities, and a paycheck that afforded some single parents the opportunity to put food on the table. Why do they stay in the military? They stay in the military because of job satisfaction and a pension. Part of the job satisfaction is having supervisors and commanders who accommodate their religious needs by allowing them to take time off for prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Some have allowed women to wear their hijāb while in uniform per the regulation which stipulates that the commander may allow the wearing of the hijāb . Why do Muslim women leave the military? Many converted to Islam after joining the military and felt that the military was incompatible with their faith because they were not allowed to wear the hijāb . After completing their contract they left the military. A small number have left because they were harassed by their supervisors who did not allow time off for prayer or leniency with physical fitness during Ramadan and because overall they were not treated well. These women had to make equal opportunity complaints and seek the aid of the chaplains and sometimes legal council to be given their rights to religious accommodations. The main reason why women leave the military, however, is the conflict they have trying to raise their families when they must spend long periods of time away from them.

Roles of Muslim women

Muslim women serve as aviators in the Air Force flying F-16s and in the Army flying helicopters, as doctors working close to the front line in times of combat, as translators (Arabic), intelligence agents, nurses, administrators, military police, chaplains' assistants, food specialists, dentists, mechanics, machinists, and in public relations, logistics, transportation, and many other jobs. Some are placed close to the front lines, as squad leaders, team leaders, platoon leaders, company commanders, and battalion commanders. There are a few examples of Muslim women in the military who have achieved some rank. The highest ranking officer is a lieutenant colonel (O-5) in the Army Medical Corps. She is a white American who converted to Islam after assignment to Tajikistan. A retired African-American lieutenant commander (O-4) in the Navy was the first female Muslim to receive a commission as a line officer in any of the armed services. A major in the Army Reserves applied to become the first female Muslim chaplain, case pending. A captain in the Marines, a public relations officer, and company commander of a public affairs company is following in her father's footsteps, an Arab-American and former Marine. In 1994 many changes were made in terms of occupations that women could hold in the military. Ninety-one percent of the positions in the Army are open to women, 94 percent in the Navy, 92 percent in the Marines, and 99 percent in the Air Force. The restrictions are combat positions or combat related positions (Manning and Wight 2003, 13).

Achievements

The greatest achievement was the appointment of the first Muslim Army chaplain in 1993. The number of Muslims in the military required them to have religious representation, and with the help of outside forces and the exposure of Islam through Desert Storm, the push for acceptance as a Muslim community within the military was inevitable. Joint Forces Commander General Khaled bin Sultan said in his book Desert Warrior that there were over 2,000 military personnel who accepted Islam during the first Gulf War while assigned in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government paid for Muslim military personnel, men and women, to perform the ḥajj , giving an international presence to the Muslims in the United States military. Other achievements are access to a pocketsize editions of "The Meaning of the Holy Quran" at military chapels, certified halal Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs), and time to perform daily prayers and attend Friday prayers, as well as Ramadan observances. The Chief of Chaplains sends memos to commanders informing them how to accommodate their Muslim personnel. Important goals that are still pending are wearing the hijāb for female Muslims and possibly the inclusion of female Muslim chaplains to minister to the needs of the Muslim population in the military. The American Muslim Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Council has been the advocate of many women on bases around the country, especially for wearing the hijāb . It has ensured that service women are represented and their rights are protected.

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