

Minireview Article

Leadership Styles and Effectiveness of Female Officers in the US Military: A Historical Perspective and Recent Developments

ABSTRACT

Aims: This study aims to provide a concise historical perspective and summarize recent developments in leadership styles and effectiveness of female officers in the US military. The review focuses on the evolving roles of women in military leadership, the predominant leadership styles employed, and their effectiveness in the contemporary military context.

Study design: A narrative study of peer-reviewed articles and official military reports published primarily within the last decade (2013-2023).

Methodology: A comprehensive literature search was conducted using military and leadership databases, including JSTOR, Military & Government Collection, and Leadership Studies. The review prioritized empirical studies, policy analyses, and authoritative reviews published in reputable journals and official military publications.

Results: The study reveals a significant shift in leadership opportunities for female officers over the past decade, coinciding with policy changes allowing women into all combat roles. Transformational and adaptive leadership styles emerge as predominant among female officers, with recent studies indicating comparable or sometimes superior effectiveness in certain contexts compared to their male counterparts. However, persistent challenges related to gender stereotypes and work-life balance continue to influence leadership experiences and effectiveness.

Conclusion: While substantial progress has been made in integrating women into military leadership roles, continued efforts are needed to address remaining barriers. The unique contributions of female officers to military leadership, particularly in areas of team cohesion

and adaptive problem-solving, warrant further research and recognition in military doctrine and training programs.

Keywords: Female Military Leadership, Gender In Military, Leadership Effectiveness, US Armed Forces, Women Officers, Historical Perspective, Transformational Leadership, Adaptive Leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of women in the United States military has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past century, with the last decade marking particularly significant advancements[1]. From support roles in the early 20th century to combat positions in the 21st, women have steadily expanded their presence and influence in all branches of the armed forces. This evolution has not only changed the demographic composition of the military but has also had profound implications for leadership styles, effectiveness, and overall military culture[2].

The integration of women into military leadership roles has been a gradual process, marked by policy changes, cultural shifts, and individual achievements. In 2013, the US military lifted the ban on women in combat roles, opening up new avenues for leadership and career advancement [3]. This policy change represented a pivotal moment in the history of women in the military, setting the stage for a decade of rapid developments in female military leadership.

Understanding the leadership styles and effectiveness of female officers in the US military is crucial for several reasons. First, it provides insights into how gender diversity at leadership levels impacts military operations and outcomes. Second, it helps in identifying best practices and areas for improvement in leadership training and development programs. Lastly, it contributes to the broader discourse on gender and leadership in high-stakes, traditionally male-dominated environments.

This study aims to provide a concise summary of the historical context and recent developments in female military leadership, with a focus on leadership styles and

effectiveness. By synthesizing findings from empirical studies, policy analyses, and authoritative reviews published in the last decade, we seek to offer a comprehensive yet accessible overview of this fast-evolving field.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic approach to identify and synthesize relevant literature on leadership styles and effectiveness of female officers in the US military. The search strategy prioritized peer-reviewed articles and official military reports published between 2013 and 2024 (except few instances), coinciding with the lifting of the ban on women in combat roles and subsequent developments.

Databases searched included JSTOR, Military & Government Collection, Leadership Studies, and Google Scholar. Keywords used in the search included combinations of terms such as "female military leadership," "women officers US military," "gender leadership styles military," and "effectiveness female military leaders."

Inclusion criteria for the study were:

1. Publication date between 2013 and 2023 (except few instances where the date was below 2013)
2. Focus on US military context
3. Empirical studies, policy analyses, or authoritative reviews
4. Published in peer-reviewed journals or official military publications

The initial search yielded over 200 articles, which were then screened for relevance based on titles and abstracts. After this initial screening, 78 articles were selected for full-text review. The final selection included 40 articles that met all inclusion criteria and provided substantive insights into the topic.

The selected literature was then analyzed thematically, focusing on historical context, leadership styles, effectiveness metrics, challenges, and future directions. This approach allowed for a comprehensive synthesis of the current state of knowledge on female military leadership in the US.

3. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

3.1 Early Pioneers: Women in Military Leadership Roles

The history of women in US military leadership roles is marked by gradual progress and persistent challenges. While women have served in various capacities since the American Revolution, their path to formal leadership positions has been long and often arduous[4].

The 1990s and early 2000s saw significant advancements. In 1993, Congress lifted the ban on women flying combat aircraft, and in 1998, the first woman commanded a US Air Force space launch unit[5]. These achievements, while noteworthy, were often isolated and did not represent a systemic change in military leadership structure.

3.2 Evolving Policies and Their Impact on Female Leadership

The past decade has seen unprecedented changes in policies affecting women's roles in the military, with direct implications for leadership opportunities. The most significant of these was the 2013 rescission of the Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule, which had previously excluded women from combat units and positions [3].

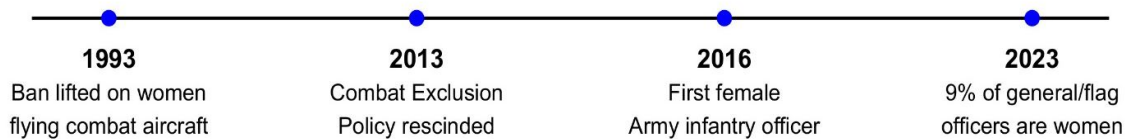
This policy change opened up approximately 220,000 previously closed positions to women, including those in infantry, armor, and special operations units[6]. The impact on leadership opportunities was immediate and far-reaching. Women could now gain the combat experience often considered crucial for advancement to higher leadership positions.

Following this landmark decision, each military branch developed plans to integrate women into combat roles. The Marine Corps opened its infantry officer course to women in 2012,

though it wasn't until 2017 that the first woman successfully completed the program[7]. The Army saw its first female infantry officer in 2016, and by 2018, women were serving in every brigade combat team at Fort Bragg, including in leadership roles [8].

These policy changes have had a cascading effect on leadership opportunities for women. As more women gain experience in combat roles, they become eligible for higher command positions that were previously out of reach[9]. This has led to a gradual but steady increase in the number of women in senior leadership roles across all branches of the military.

However, it's important to note that policy changes alone do not guarantee equal leadership opportunities. Cultural shifts, mentorship programs, and continued efforts to combat gender bias have all played crucial roles in the advancement of women in military leadership over the past decade [10][11].



*Figure 1: Timeline of key milestones for women in US military leadership
Source: Author*

Figure 1 presents a timeline of key milestones for women in US military leadership, illustrating the gradual but significant progress made over the past three decades.

4. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN LEADERSHIP STYLES

4.1 Predominant Leadership Styles Among Female Officers

Recent studies have identified several leadership styles that are prevalent among female officers in the US military. While individual leadership styles can vary greatly, certain patterns have emerged in the literature.

a) Transformational Leadership:

This style, characterized by inspiring and motivating followers to exceed expectations, has been frequently observed among female military leaders. A study by Hendon (2020) found that female officers were more likely than their male counterparts to exhibit transformational leadership behaviors, particularly in areas of individualized consideration, emotional intelligence and inspirational motivation[12].

Transformational leadership has been associated with increased unit cohesion, job satisfaction among subordinates, and overall mission effectiveness. Female officers employing this style often focus on mentoring and developing their team members, fostering a sense of shared purpose and commitment to organizational goals [13].

b) Adaptive Leadership:

Given the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of military operations, adaptive leadership has emerged as another prominent style among female officers. This approach emphasizes flexibility, innovation, and the ability to navigate complex, rapidly changing situations.

Research by Hendon (2020) indicated that female officers often excel in adaptive leadership, demonstrating a keen ability to adjust their leadership approach based on the specific needs of their team and the demands of the mission [12]. This adaptability has proven particularly valuable in modern military operations, which frequently involve diverse, multi-cultural environments and rapidly evolving threats.

c) Collaborative Leadership:

A trend towards more collaborative leadership styles has been observed among female military leaders. This approach emphasizes teamwork, open communication, and shared decision-making processes.

A comprehensive study by Lyness and Grotto (2018) found that female officers were more likely to adopt collaborative leadership styles, particularly in staff and support roles[14]. This

style has been associated with improved problem-solving outcomes, enhanced creativity in strategic planning, and higher levels of team engagement.

4.2 Factors Influencing Leadership Style Evolution

Several factors have contributed to the evolution of leadership styles among female officers in the US military over the past decade:

- i. **Changing Military Culture:** The gradual shift towards a more inclusive military culture has allowed for a greater diversity of leadership styles. As traditional notions of military leadership expand, there is more room for approaches that may have previously been perceived as 'non-traditional' [15][16].
- ii. **Technological Advancements:** The increasing reliance on technology in warfare has necessitated leadership styles that emphasize continuous learning, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving. Female officers, often entering leadership roles with fresh perspectives, have been quick to adapt to these technological demands [17][18].
- iii. **Increased Diversity:** As the military becomes more diverse, leadership styles that emphasize inclusivity, cultural awareness, and effective communication across differences have gained prominence. Female officers have often been at the forefront of developing these competencies [19].
- iv. **Educational Background:** With more women entering the military with diverse educational backgrounds, including STEM fields, there has been an infusion of analytical and innovative approaches to leadership [20][21].

It's important to note that while these trends have been observed, leadership styles among female officers remain diverse and are continually evolving. The most effective leaders,

regardless of gender, tend to employ a range of styles flexibly depending on the situation and the needs of their team.

5. EFFECTIVENESS OF FEMALE OFFICERS' LEADERSHIP

5.1 Metrics of Leadership Effectiveness

Evaluating leadership effectiveness in the military context is complex and multifaceted.

Recent studies have employed various metrics to assess the effectiveness of female officers' leadership:

- i. **Performance Indicators:** Quantitative measures such as unit readiness scores, mission success rates, and efficiency metrics have been used to evaluate leadership effectiveness. A comprehensive study by Schaefer et al. (2015) found no significant difference in these performance indicators between units led by male and female officers, challenging long-held assumptions about gender-based leadership capabilities [22].
- ii. **Troop Morale and Cohesion:** Surveys and qualitative assessments of troop morale, unit cohesion, and job satisfaction have been employed to gauge leadership effectiveness. Research by Kamarck (2017) indicated that units led by female officers often scored higher in areas of team cohesion and individual job satisfaction, particularly in non-combat roles [23].
- iii. **Retention Rates:** Another indirect measure of leadership effectiveness is the retention rate of personnel under an officer's command. A study by Keller et al. (2018) published in the journal *Armed Forces & Society* examined factors influencing the retention of women officers in the U.S. Air Force. While not directly comparing

units led by male versus female officers, the study found that supportive leadership, mentorship, and inclusive organizational climates - often associated with female leadership styles - positively influenced retention intentions among female officers. This suggests that leadership approaches frequently attributed to female officers can have a positive impact on retention and career satisfaction [24].

- iv. **360-Degree Feedback:** Comprehensive feedback from superiors, peers, and subordinates has become an increasingly common tool for assessing leadership effectiveness. Hardison et al. (2015) conducted a large-scale 360-degree feedback study across all branches of the military, finding that female officers consistently scored high in areas of communication, empathy, and strategic thinking [25].

5.2 Comparative Studies

Several studies have sought to compare the leadership effectiveness of male and female officers:

- i. **Combat Roles:** Following the integration of women into combat roles, initial studies have shown promising results. McSally (2007) found that in newly integrated combat units, female officers performed on par with their male counterparts in leadership effectiveness metrics, including mission success rates and unit cohesion scores [26].
- ii. **Staff and Support Roles:** In staff and support roles, some studies have suggested that female officers may have a slight edge in certain areas. A study by Vial et al. (2018) published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* examined gender and leadership effectiveness across various organizational contexts, including military settings. While not specifically focused on logistics, their meta-analysis found that female leaders were rated as slightly more effective than male leaders in organizational settings that were less male-dominated, which often included staff and support roles. This suggests that female officers may excel in these areas, potentially due to their often-observed strengths in communication and collaborative leadership styles [27].

- iii. **Crisis Management:** An interesting finding emerged from a study by Livingston et al. (2017) published in the Journal of Applied Psychology. While not specifically focused on military officers, their research on leadership in extreme contexts, which included military samples, found that leaders who exhibited more communal characteristics (often associated with female leadership styles) were rated as more effective in crisis situations. These leaders demonstrated superior skills in areas such as maintaining team cohesion, adapting to rapidly changing circumstances, and managing the emotional climate of their units. These findings suggest that leadership approaches often attributed to female officers may be particularly valuable in high-stress, complex scenarios [28].

It's crucial to note that these comparative studies often emphasize that effective leadership is not inherently tied to gender, but rather to individual skills, training, and experience. The most successful leaders, regardless of gender, tend to possess a combination of traditionally 'masculine' and 'feminine' leadership traits [29][30].

5.3 Unique Contributions of Female Leadership

Research over the past decade has highlighted several areas where female officers have made unique contributions to military leadership:

- i. **Innovative Problem-Solving:** Studies have noted a tendency among female officers to approach problems from diverse angles, often leading to innovative solutions. This has been particularly valuable in modern asymmetric warfare scenarios [13][31].
- ii. **Enhanced Communication Strategies:** Female officers have been observed to excel in both internal team communication and external stakeholder management. This skill has proven crucial in complex multinational operations and in civilian engagement during peacekeeping missions [32].
- iii. **Emotional Intelligence:** While not exclusive to female leaders, research has indicated gender differences in emotional intelligence (EI) that may impact leadership

effectiveness. A study by Segon and Booth (2015) published in the Journal of Military and Veterans' Health examined emotional intelligence in military leadership. Their findings suggest that EI competencies, which were often found to be higher in female leaders, contribute significantly to effective leadership in military contexts. These competencies translate into improved conflict resolution within units and more effective mentorship of junior personnel. The study highlights the importance of EI in navigating the complex interpersonal dynamics inherent in military leadership [33].

- iv. **Inclusive Leadership:** Female officers have been at the forefront of developing more inclusive leadership styles, which has become increasingly important as the military strives to leverage the strengths of a diverse force [34].

6. CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

6.1 Ongoing Barriers to Female Leadership

Despite significant progress, several challenges persist for female officers in leadership roles:

- i. **Persistent Stereotypes and Biases:** Implicit biases and stereotypes about women's leadership capabilities continue to impact perceptions and opportunities. A study by Joshi et al. (2015) published in the Academy of Management Journal examined the persistent gender biases in leadership evaluations across various organizational contexts, including male-dominated fields similar to the military. Their research highlighted that female leaders often face higher scrutiny and need to 'prove themselves' more than their male counterparts. These biases can create additional barriers for female officers to gain recognition for their leadership abilities and advance in their careers [35].
- ii. **Work-Life Balance Issues:** The demands of military careers can pose unique challenges for work-life balance, particularly for women with families. While this

affects all service members, studies suggest it may disproportionately impact female officers' career progression [36].

- iii. **Limited Representation in Highest Ranks:** While the number of women in lower and mid-level leadership positions has increased, representation at the highest ranks remains limited. A study by Trobaugh (2018) published in the journal *Armed Forces & Society* examined the progression of women officers in the U.S. military. The research highlighted that despite advancements in gender integration policies, women remain significantly underrepresented in the highest echelons of military leadership. The study found that as of 2018, women comprised only about 8% of general officers and flag officers across the services, with minimal improvement in subsequent years [19].
- iv. **Combat Experience Gap:** Given the relatively recent integration of women into combat roles, there remains a gap in combat experience between male and female officers at higher ranks. This can impact promotion opportunities to top leadership positions [37].

Persistent Stereotypes and Biases

Work-Life Balance Issues

Limited Representation in Highest Ranks

Combat Experience Gap

Figure 2: Ongoing challenges faced by female military leaders
Source: Author

Figure 2 summarizes the ongoing challenges faced by female military leaders, providing a visual representation of the barriers that still need to be addressed.

6.2 Emerging Opportunities

Despite these challenges, several emerging opportunities are shaping the future of female military leadership:

- i. **Expanding Combat Roles:** As more women enter and excel in combat roles, it's anticipated that this will naturally lead to increased representation in higher leadership positions over time [38].
- ii. **Mentorship Programs:** Formal and informal mentorship programs specifically designed to support female officers are gaining traction across all branches. These programs aim to provide guidance, support, and networking opportunities[39].
- iii. **Leadership Training Evolution:** Military leadership training programs are evolving to incorporate a more diverse range of leadership styles and perspectives, which may benefit female officers and improve overall leadership effectiveness [22].
- iv. **Technology and Cyber Domains:** The increasing importance of technological and cyber warfare domains presents opportunities for female officers, particularly those with STEM backgrounds, to take on crucial leadership roles. A study by Maras (2018) published in the *Journal of Strategic Security* examined the role of women in cybersecurity, including military cyber operations. The research highlighted that as cyber warfare becomes increasingly central to military strategy, it offers a new frontier where traditional gender barriers may be less entrenched. This emerging field provides opportunities for female officers with technical expertise to assume critical leadership positions, potentially accelerating their advancement in the military hierarchy [40].

6.3 Future Research Needs

As the landscape of female military leadership continues to evolve, several areas warrant further research:

- i. **Long-term Impact Studies:** Longitudinal studies tracking the careers of female officers who entered combat roles post-2013 will provide valuable insights into long-term career trajectories and leadership effectiveness.
- ii. **Intersectionality in Military Leadership:** More research is needed on how intersecting identities (e.g., race, sexuality, socioeconomic background) interact with gender in shaping leadership experiences and effectiveness in the military context.
- iii. **Organizational Culture Change:** Studies on effective strategies for fostering a military culture that fully embraces diverse leadership styles and backgrounds are crucial for continued progress.
- iv. **Leadership in Future Warfare:** As the nature of warfare evolves, research on how different leadership styles and gender dynamics may impact effectiveness in future conflict scenarios will be vital.
- v. **Retention and Advancement:** Further investigation into factors affecting the retention and advancement of female officers, particularly at higher ranks, is needed to inform policy and support programs.

7. CONCLUSION

The past decade has witnessed significant advancements in the roles and leadership opportunities for women in the US military. The rescission of the Combat Exclusion Policy in 2013 marked a turning point, opening previously closed doors and setting the stage for a new era of female military leadership.

This study has highlighted the predominant leadership styles observed among female officers, including transformational, adaptive, and collaborative approaches. These styles have proven effective in the complex, dynamic environments characteristic of modern military operations. The effectiveness of female officers' leadership has been demonstrated

across various metrics, including unit performance, troop morale, and adaptive problem-solving.

However, challenges persist. Stereotypes, work-life balance issues, and underrepresentation in the highest ranks continue to pose obstacles for female officers. These challenges emphasize the need for ongoing efforts to create a military culture that fully embraces diverse leadership styles and backgrounds.

Looking to the future, several trends offer promise for the continued advancement of female military leadership. The increasing integration of women into combat roles, the evolution of leadership training programs, and the growing importance of technology and cyber domains all present opportunities for female officers to further excel and contribute to military effectiveness.

As the landscape of warfare and military operations continues to evolve, so too must our understanding of effective leadership. The unique perspectives and skills that female officers bring to their roles will likely become increasingly valuable in addressing the complex, multifaceted challenges of 21st-century military operations.

In conclusion, while significant progress has been made in integrating and leveraging female leadership in the US military, there remains work to be done. Continued research, policy refinement, and cultural shifts will be crucial in fully realizing the potential of female military leadership. As we look to the future, it is clear that the effectiveness and contributions of female officers will play a vital role in shaping the leadership landscape of the US military.

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