

WOMEN IN SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Improvements to Policy, Data, and Assessments Needed to Better Understand and Address Career Barriers

Why GAO Did This Study

Women have historically held critical roles in the military. However, women make up less than 10 percent of SOCOM service members, compared with about 19 percent DOD-wide. SOCOM leaders have acknowledged existing issues of gender discrimination, sexual harassment and assault, and career impediments, and the need to do more.

GAO was asked to review the incidence of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and DOD's efforts to assess potential barriers to women in SOF. This report examines, among other issues, the extent to which (1) DOD has developed policies to prevent and respond to such incidents involving SOCOM service members, (2) SOCOM has access to data on these incidents, and (3) DOD and SOCOM have identified and addressed barriers that may impact the careers of women in SOF. GAO reviewed policies; interviewed DOD, SOCOM, and service officials; interviewed officials at five SOF headquarters installations; and interviewed 51 women currently or formerly serving in SOF.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations, including that the military services revise their policies for incidents in joint environments to align with DOD policy, DOD establish a collaborative process for SOCOM to access data, DOD clarify oversight and use of the annual assessments, and DOD complete a comprehensive analysis of barriers to women in SOF. DOD concurred with all eight. DOD also commented on aspects of the scope, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-23-105168](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense's (DOD) policies to prevent and respond to incidents of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault are applicable department-wide. But some of the implementing service policies related to the environments in which U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) operates are inconsistent with DOD policy. The military services, not SOCOM, are responsible for administering service-specific policies on these types of incidents; however, SOCOM service members conduct missions in a joint (i.e., multi-service) environment. Some of the services' policies related to incidents of gender discrimination and sexual harassment occurring in joint environments are not aligned with DOD policies. DOD policies state that, in joint environments, discrimination and harassment complaints are to be processed through the complainant's service. In contrast, Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force policies all assign this responsibility to the alleged offender's service. Without the military services revising their policies for joint environments to help ensure alignment with DOD policies, such cases may be processed inconsistently across DOD.

SOCOM has limited access to timely, accurate, and complete data on its personnel, including incidents of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. While SOCOM has taken some steps to address its data access limitations, the department has not established a collaborative process to ensure SOCOM has access to data maintained in various Office of the Secretary of Defense and military service databases. Without such a process to facilitate SOCOM's access to needed data, SOCOM leadership will not be positioned to identify trends or address urgent concerns.

SOCOM has taken some steps to identify and address barriers, such as gender discrimination and pregnancy-related policies, that may affect women's careers in U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF).

SOCOM-Identified Barriers to Women Serving in U.S. Special Operations Forces



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) information. | GAO-23-105168

However, DOD has yet to complete a comprehensive evaluation of barriers to women or developed a plan of action for addressing identified barriers. In addition, per a 2016 DOD requirement, SOCOM and the military departments are to conduct annual assessments on the full integration of women into previously closed positions. DOD has not, however, communicated which office has oversight responsibility for the assessments and their intended use is unclear. Without taking action to address these issues, DOD and Congress may be limited in their efforts to understand and address barriers to women in SOF.