

# Reflecting on US Female Engagement Teams (FETs) in Afghanistan

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Afghan role-player shows female military personnel how to wear headscarf  
US army training, author photo (2011)



# US Government WPS Strategy

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- Updated US Government WPS strategy released October 31, 2023.
- 2023 strategy result of coordination between Department of State, US Agency for International Development, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Defense (DoD)
- DoD foci: sexual harassment/assault protection, gender advisors, embedding WPS into engagements with partner nations, advancing women's military participation



# Female counterinsurgency teams

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- “Lioness” teams (2003): ad hoc, used servicewomen to search Iraqi women at checkpoints
- “Female engagement teams” (FETs) (2009): more institutionalized, humanitarian rhetoric
- “Cultural support teams” (CSTs) (2010): Most institutionalized, special operations, rejection of humanitarian rhetoric





CST night raid, photograph from *Ashley's War*





Female engagement team (FET) member speaking with Afghan boys. Image from *San Diego Union Tribune* article, “Marines find gender useful as a weapon in Afghanistan”



“You have different tools as a woman that you can use that I don’t think a man would be successful in.”

“He – the ranger – looked like a storm trooper, wearing a helmet and carrying a rifle. But for me to kneel next to the little kid and take off my helmet and maybe put my hand on his shoulder and say, ‘there there.’ I can do that with my voice. This guy [the ranger] probably could not or would not. And that kid was crying and we couldn’t get anything out of him. But you can turn the tables with a completely different energy.”

*Cindy, former CST*



“You’re busting into someone’s house at 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning. You’re scaring the living daylights out of people. I would imagine myself in their situation. I would go bonkers...To have a family, to have a spouse and kids – imagine how the kids felt...It was hard, but we *had* to do it. I’ve got bills to pay. I need my paycheck.”

–*Edith, former Lioness (2003-4)*

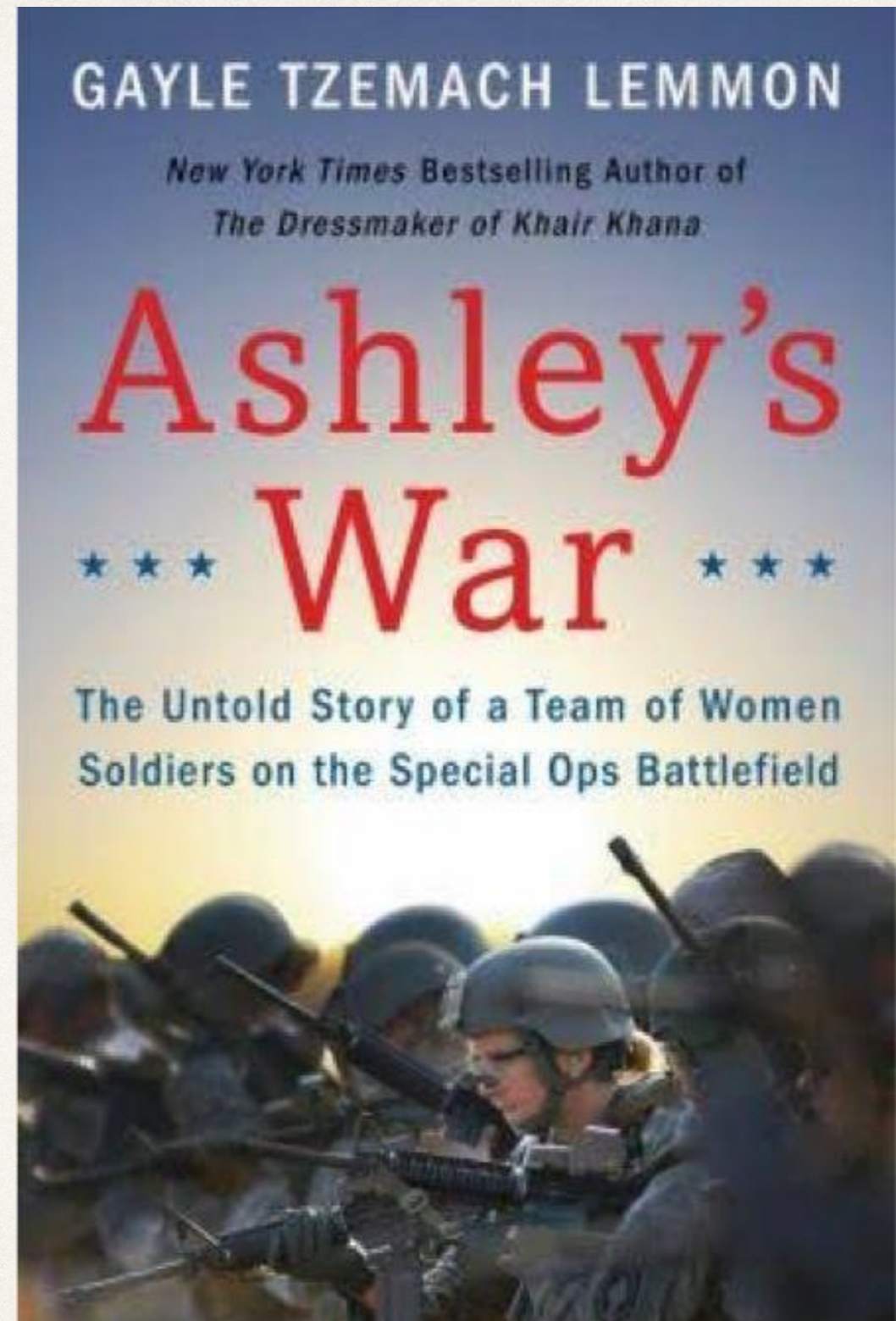




Female engagement team questioning woman and child during vehicle interdiction, Afghanistan.  
Image from Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System.



*She [Ashley White] was a petite blond dynamo who barely reached five foot three. And she was this wild mix of Martha Stewart and what we know as GI Jane. She was someone who loved to make dinner for her husband...She also loved to put 50 pounds of weight on her back and run for miles. And she loved to be a soldier. She was somebody who had a bread maker in her office in Kandahar. And would make a batch of raisin bread and go to the gym and bust out 25 or 30 pull ups from a dead hang.*







Ashley White, pictured in *Ashley's War*, on her wedding day, and in CST training



# FEMALE SOLDIERS

## BECOME A PART OF HISTORY

### Join the US Army Special Operations Command Female Engagement Team Program

The Female Engagement Team (FET) program will provide you with intense mental and physical training designed to prepare you for the rigors associated with assisting Special Forces and Ranger units in Afghanistan. You will be trained to think critically, interact with local Afghan women and children, and integrate as a member of an elite unit. Once trained, you will be assigned to the FET program for up to 1 year as either a Screener or a Cultural Support Team member.

#### Minimum Requirements:

- E-4 - E-8, 01 - 03, WO1 - CW3
- current minimum GT Score of 100 or better
- PT Score of 210 with at least 70 pts in each event
- meet height and weight IAW AR 600-9
- minimum Secret clearance
- must carry 35 lbs six miles in at least 1 hr and 39 mins
- pre-screened by current unit of assignment

#### For more information:

visit our website - <http://www.soc.mil/CST/CST.html>

call - 910-396-0645 (DSN 236)

910-432-6283 (DSN 239)

email - [cst@soc.mil](mailto:cst@soc.mil)

Recruitment poster  
for female  
counterinsurgent  
teams (2011)



“I had always wondered what it was like to live in the Stone Age and now I know. I see it every day around me. People walking around in clothes that haven’t been washed...children with hair white from days of dust build up. Eyes that tell a story of hardship. Houses made of mud...dirty, misshapen feet.”

*–Rochelle, Female Engagement Team member (2012)*





Image from *Military Review* article, caption reads: “Members of a female engagement team discuss the needs and wants of the female population and to help improve their way of life.”



“It was like going into a time warp. Imagine huts. And tons of women, tons of men and children, in these *huts*. ... We had to tell these women, ‘the reason your children are getting sick is because you’re not boiling your water.’ I mean, that’s insane...look at when the Bible was written – people then even knew how to boil their water...”

- *Beth, former FET*





FETs speaking with Afghan women on patrol in Afghanistan  
Marine Photo (Lindsey Sayres)  
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# Conclusions for WPS Agenda

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- Female soldier became equal rights issue in United States
- Now that equal right to work in all military jobs won, what are lessons learned?
- Policy, formal inclusion not same as equality. Persistence of sexist misogynist military culture a barrier to equality.
- Question of equality for US servicewomen in tension with worsening situation for Afghan women after 20 years of war; problematic cultural, religious, racial ideas about Afghan women within US military



Thank you!