

**From:** The Australia Defence Association  
**Sent:** Thursday, 10 September 2009 12:43 AM  
**To:** Kirstin Murray (ABC Television - 7:30 Report)  
**Subject:** Problems with the 7:30 Report Segment "Aussie Combat Women", Wed 09 Sep 09  
**Importance:** High

Dear Kirstin,

There were several unnecessary and serious mistakes in the way the story on employing female ADF personnel in combat was presented on tonight's "7:30 Report" – not least the needless confusion about where our female personnel can and do serve and what constitutes "combat" and "support" and what a "frontline" could be. Given that the well-known issues comment on the ADA website discusses the complex topic of women in combat in some detail (see [http://www.ada.asn.au/Recent.Comment\\_files/Comment.Women&Combat.htm](http://www.ada.asn.au/Recent.Comment_files/Comment.Women&Combat.htm)), and has long included a plea for the media to discontinue its frequent poor or sensationalist coverage of this issue, it is very disappointing to see yet another program include so many basic errors of fact, ambiguous terminology and apparent misunderstandings.

As the issues comment on our website notes, female ADF personnel serving in combat and on the "frontline" (on behalf of all Australians) are increasingly annoyed when media reports say they somehow do not, or supposedly cannot, exist. Your program tonight is yet another example of such insult and the ADA is frankly puzzled how this could occur on one of the country's premier current affairs programs (and after such specific explanatory warnings being available).

The line in tonight's program that "... those 7000 soldiers, sailors and air crew [sic] are limited to support roles" is just plain wrong. It is totally incorrect for female personnel throughout the RAN and RAAF because they can and do serve in direct and indirect combat functions in all combat units (with the tiny exception of airbase defence guards in the Air Force), and have done so for many years. The "support" line is also largely incorrect for females serving in the Army because the use of the word "support" in such an unqualified fashion implies a logistic or administrative function only whereas female diggers have long served in various combat-support arms units and for the last two years in combat-manoeuvre arms units.

The alleged comparisons with foreign countries were also all wrong and/or cases of comparing apples and pears. Again the unqualified use of the term "frontline" caused confusion rather than clarity. Israel, for example, has not had women in combat-manoeuvre arms units since the 1948 war and their employment in combat-support arms units on the "frontline" is effectively narrower than Australia. Switzerland is surely not a valid comparison because the Swiss armed forces have not fought a war since 1803 so there is no empirical value in their purported example because it has never been tested in combat. Similarly, Norway has not fought a serious war since 1945, Afghanistan is Canada's first serious war since Korea in 1950-53 and so is Vietnam for New Zealand. Valid comparisons would be countries that have actually had significant combat experience in modern wars with deployed forces including large numbers of women.

The best ones are the US and UK and overall the ADF is ahead of both of them in the ways female personnel are employed. Some comparison with Canada is valid but only if explanations for real and apparent differences are used. Such as Canada employing female gunners in field artillery units because the Canadians are equipped with self-propelled guns with largely automated first-line loading systems, not the (un-automated) towed artillery nearing the end of its operational life that the ADF has – a big difference when the shells weigh 43 kilograms each and loading the gun requires reaching, lifting and twisting actions beyond most women and many men. This quite valid point about testing employment criteria and the physicality standards involved in actual combat, rather than purported comparisons citing untested and frankly peacetime tinkering, was entirely omitted from tonight's program. Such points need to be raised even if only to ensure informed debate on the merits or not of such combat testing.

It is also worth noting that each one of Eva Cox's old-fashioned and outdated comments clearly showed she was not aware of the current situation regarding the employment of females in the ADF, nor indeed of anything else about the ADF, modern warfare or the international law governing both.

Finally, may I register a particular protest about the way the ADA position was included in the program. None of the substantive points we made were used and the very short grabs involved were all truncated and/or used out of context. The overall effects were that our views on the issue were misrepresented and that some key aspects of this complex and nuanced topic were missed or skated over. Our key points about operational capability surely needing to be being the key determinant of employment policy, the effects of bio-mechanical differences and physicality on the employment principles involved, and the genuinely discriminatory risk of disproportionate female casualties in some cases, were all excluded. That we have long advocated a reasoned and reasonable middle-ground stance between the extremes of absolutely denying or absolutely employing females in every combat function in the ADF was also absent from the program.

Moreover, in the program's concluding sequence (in both senses of conclusion) my comment about the potential consequences of females being captured was unfairly edited by the removal of my concluding sentence and main point being made. This utterly reversed the very point I was making - that the acceptance of such after-capture risks in this day and age was really a matter of personal choice for the female ADF personnel concerned. To add insult to injury, there was then a cut to Eva Cox who was allowed to make virtually the same point in supposed contradiction of the ADA when no such difference of opinion exists in this matter. This editing, and in the story's finale, was at the very least quite unfair. It gave the completely false and misleading impressions that the ADA is somehow opposed to female ADF personnel having the right to make such vital decisions (when we stress the opposite in our website comments) - and that we supposedly have an "anti-feminist" stance overall when our views on employment policy in the ADF are not driven by gender-based assumptions at all (as our website issues comment has also long made perfectly clear).

The ADA goes to considerable and frequent effort to help the ABC with its coverage of defence and wider national security issues. We are therefore naturally disappointed when we are so badly treated for our efforts. We are an independent, non-partisan, public-interest guardian organisation and we take our responsibility for contributions to informed public debate very seriously. Tonight's 7:30 Report segment has unfairly tarnished our public reputation in general. Furthermore, over the next few days considerable time and effort will have to be diverted to answering emails that explain what we really said as opposed to what was broadcast, and what we actually believe, to those needlessly confused by the edited, misrepresented and frankly garbled versions broadcast tonight.

There are clear lessons from tonight's program on the need to ensure fair and indeed accurate representation of the views sought from participants – and to not insult the many ADF females serving in combat positions today, tomorrow and for the foreseeable future in Afghanistan.

I would be happy to discuss these important matters further because they surely go the heart of the need for professional and unbiased broadcasting of important national issues. And in this case we must never forget that we are talking about a matter involving life and death literally not figuratively.

Regards, Neil

**Neil James**  
**Executive Director**  
**Australia Defence Association**