What’s happening with women and Selective Service registration?

Congress is now considering legislation to expand the requirement to register with the Selective Service System for a possible military draft to include young women as well as young men. This proposal has been endorsed by President Biden and is included in this year’s “defense” bill. Women born in 2005 or after will probably be required to register for the draft as they turn 18, starting in 2023.

Women have played key roles in resistance to military conscription, even when only men were being drafted. There’s a long tradition of anti-war and anti-draft feminism. (See the other side of this leaflet for some past and present statements by feminists and allies against a draft of men or women.)

Trying to salvage draft registration by expanding it to young women as well as young men would mean doubling down on decades of failure of draft registration in the face of widespread noncompliance.

Since 1980, all male U.S. residents have been supposed to register with the Selective Service System when they turn 18, and notify Selective Service every time they change their address until their 26th birthday. But few young men have ever complied fully with this law.

Almost nobody tells the Selective Service System when they move. Most draft notices sent to the addresses in Selective Service records would either be undeliverable or would go to draftees’ parents, many of whom would refuse to accept these induction orders or tear them up to protect their children.

Only 20 people have been prosecuted for refusing to register since 1980. Show trials of activists called attention to the resistance and showed that those who quietly ignored registration could not be prosecuted. The government abandoned criminal enforcement of draft registration in 1988. Resistance made registration unenforceable, and made the registration list useless for a fair or inclusive draft.

Both feminist and anti-feminist women will be even more likely to oppose and resist being forced into the military than men have been, and more people will support them in their resistance.

Members of Congress and the public need to hear from anti-war and anti-draft feminists and from young people who oppose forcing anyone into the military. Any draft serves war, militarism, and patriarchy, and enhances the ability of the US to fight unlimited, endless wars in more places around the world. They need to hear from the resistance: women who will resist signing up to go anywhere and fight and kill (or be killed by) anyone the Commander-In-Chief orders them to consider his enemies. They need to hear from allies, men and women, young and old, who will support those who resist.

The choice is not between continuing male-only draft registration and expanding registration to women. The real choice is whether to expand draft registration to women or to end it entirely. This is a choice about militarism, not a choice about gender equality. Expanding draft registration to women would bring about a semblance of equality in war (although women in the military would likely still be subject to disproportionate sexual harassment and abuse). Ending draft registration would bring about real equality in peace and freedom.

- Support legislation to end draft registration. Ask your U.S. Representative and Senators to co-sponsor the bipartisan Selective Service Repeal Act of 2021 (H.R. 2509 and S. 1139).
- Don’t register for the draft. Speak out about your intent to resist if you are ordered to register with the Selective Service System or to be drafted into the military.
- Be an ally to young women and men in their resistance to draft registration.
- Educate, agitate, and organize against a draft or draft registration of women or men.

For more about the draft, draft registration, and draft resistance, see:

www.resisters.info
“Expanding Selective Service registration to women is not feminism. Expanding the draft would merely expand a burden that has been unjustly placed on men for decades. Selective Service takes away personal choice, rewards militarism, punishes pacifism, and reproduces inequality.” (“A Feminist Take on the Selective Service”, Women’s Action for New Directions, 2021)

“Our liberation will not be realized through war crimes. As 18- to 25-year-olds, we are within the age range to have to register with Selective Service. No matter how hard the military tries to co-opt feminism and progressive ideals, war will never be a part of a framework for imagining equity because the first casualty of war is always human dignity. As draft-age people, the only reform we support is the complete abolition of compulsory military service.” (“Expanding the Military Draft Is Not Feminism. Abolishing Draft Registration Is.” Op-Ed by Danaka Katovich and the CODEPINK Youth Peace Collective, 2021)

“While we demand equal pay for women in all areas of our economy, it is irresponsible for the fight for women's rights to seek equal moral injury, equal PTSD, equal brain injury, equal suicide rates, equal lost limbs, or equal violent tendencies that military veterans suffer from. When it comes to the military, women's equality is better served by ending draft registration for everyone. Let's not expand draft registration but abolish it.” (Statement from CODEPINK to the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service, 2019)

“You don't stop the runaway truck of U.S. foreign policy by throwing a man in front of it, and you definitely don't stop it by throwing a man and a woman, just to make things equal.” (Lucy Steigerwald, Antiwar.com, 2016)

“There are important issues women continue to battle to achieve real, tangible equality. But finally giving them the right to fight and die under a policy they and most Americans disagree with is hardly a win.” (Kaitlyn Buss, editorial columnist, Detroit News, 2016)

“Women: do not register for the draft. No one – man or woman – should register, or be required to register, for the draft.... Did Congress think that ‘women's equality’ meant sending us off to war? Women's equality is peace, democracy, economic justice, racial justice, environmental sustainability, restorative justice, ending mass incarceration, providing for all children of this country, caring for our elders, affordable healthcare and housing, and debt-free student education. Women's equality does not – and never will – include forcing us to kill our fellow human beings in order to protect the patriarchal, oligarchic, racist, imperialistic interests of the greedy, war-profiteering few.” (Rivera Sun, 2016)

“To the liberals’ challenge, ‘If they draft men, why not draft women?’ there’s really only one answer — it’s not okay to draft men. And no, it’s not okay to draft women, and no, we don’t owe the government collusion in as patriarchal and misogynist an institution as the draft…. Whatever else it is, war is a patriarchal institution, and every war is a war against women.” (Karen Lindsey of Women Opposed to Registration and the Draft, speech at rally on Boston Common during Congressional debate on whether to include women in draft registration, 1980)

“We do not want to be drafted into the army. We do not want our young brothers to be drafted. We want them equal with us.” (Women’s Pentagon Action unity statement, 1980)

“The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom strenuously opposes the conscription of men or women for war and we oppose registration as the first step toward conscription.... Sisterhood is international. If we embrace militarism and conscription as part of equality we will be declaring our sisters as enemies.” (1980)

“I will not register for conscription, if conscription comes for women.... Instead, I publish my statement here, and if it encourages other women not to register, I shall be glad.... I shall not register because I believe modern war to be murder.... I shall not register because registration is the first step towards conscription, and the only way to do away with war is to do away with conscription.” (Dorothy Day, Catholic Worker, 1943)