What’s happening with women and Selective Service registration?

As a result of a Federal court decision that it is unconstitutional to require men, but not women, to register with the Selective Service System for a possible military draft, Congress is currently considering legislation to expand draft registration to include young women as well as young men.

This proposal has been endorsed by President Biden and by a government-appointed bipartisan National Commission on Military Service. Unless opposition and the likelihood of resistance becomes more visible to Congress, this legislation is likely to be enacted in 2021. 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, the last in 1986. All of those who were convicted were people who had spoken out publicly and/or had told the government they refused to register, so that their own statements could be used against them. 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 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.

Equality can best be achieved through freeing both men and women from any threat of a draft.

• Support legislation to end draft registration, rather than trying to expand it to women.
• Urge U.S. Representatives to co-sponsor Rep. DeFazio’s bill to end draft registration, and ask U.S. Senators to introduce a similar bill.
• Tell Congress that you will resist if you are ordered to register with the Selective Service System or to be drafted into the military, and that you will support others who resist.

For more about the draft, draft registration, and draft resistance, see: www.resisters.info
The argument that extending the registration requirement to women is a way to help reduce gender-based discrimination is specious. It does not represent a move forward for women; it represents a move backward, imposing on young women a burden that young men have had to bear unjustly for many decades – a burden that no young person should have to bear at all. Even more disturbing, this argument fails to acknowledge or address the pervasive climate of sexism and sexual violence that is the reality of military life for many women who serve. If the argument for requiring registration of women as well as men, often framed erroneously as an argument for ‘equal rights,’ prevails, our society's already swift move toward normalizing military violence for youth and young adults in general, will gain a particular focus on women's participation in military violence. We believe that ... the push to extend the registration requirement to women is made – at least in part – because it will become a facilitating factor for recruiting more people to fight our current endless wars.” (Joint statement by the National Network Opposing the Militarization of Youth, AFSC, Jewish Peace Fellowship, War Resisters League, and other organizations, 2016)

“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 submitted 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. The draft should be completely eliminated. 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)

“Tell Congress: Don't Force Women to Register for the Draft, Dump the Draft Entirely.” (Petition initiated by Julie Mastrine of San Francisco, presented with more than 25,000 signatures to the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service at one of its public events in Los Angeles, 2018)

“Selective Service System registration is ageist, in that it only targets youth; sexist, in that it only targets those identified male at birth; undemocratic, as it takes away the right to religious freedom; and immoral, since it takes away the choice to follow one's conscience.” (Kate Connell, TruthInRecruitment.org, letter to the editor, Los Angeles Times, 2019)

“I wouldn't mind the privilege of being among the first women to burn their draft cards.” (Karen Lindsey, speech at anti-draft rally 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 – it does not stop at international borders. If we embrace militarism and conscription as part of equality we will be declaring our sisters as enemies.... Say NO to registration; say NO to the draft!” (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)