



USA, same physical test for men and women in the Army. Europe is more cautious

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From June 1, 2025, the United States Army will adopt a new "gender-neutral" physical test for entry and retention in operational roles. A decision that marks a radical shift: **men and women will have to meet the same physical standards**, without any distinction, in the name of operational efficiency and “force lethality.”

The announcement, released Monday by the Pentagon, follows the order of Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to permanently eliminate gender-based physical requirements for frontline roles. The new test, called the **AFT (Army Functional Test)**, will replace the previous Combat Fitness Test and will include weightlifting, push-ups, planks, a two-mile run, and a sprint-drag-carry event.

The new AFT (Army Functional Test), which will replace the previous Combat Fitness Test in the US Army, does not foresee differences between men and women. @ US ARMY

A threshold difficult to overcome for many female soldiers

According to analysts, **the new standard could drastically reduce the number of women qualified for combat roles**, especially among the younger ones, who will have to face much tougher tests than in the past: for example, lifting 140 pounds instead of 120 and completing the run in significantly shorter times. Those who fail the test twice consecutively may be transferred to non-combat roles, where differentiated criteria for gender and age will remain in effect.

A choice that has sparked controversy, also because it seems to contradict the internal studies of the same American defense: **a 2017 research** had concluded that physiological differences between men and women should be managed with targeted training programs, **not with identical standards**. Moreover, **a 2022 study by the Rand Corporation** highlighted much higher failure rates among women and older military personnel, raising doubts about the sustainability of the new system.

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New US tests: same standard for men and women, but many female soldiers risk exclusion from operational roles.

In Europe, the differentiated approach prevails

The situation is quite different in the main European armies, where **physical standards remain differentiated for men and women**, except for specific exceptions related to elite operational roles.

- **United Kingdom:** The *British Army* adopts a dual system. General tests are calibrated by gender and age, but for close combat roles (*Ground Close Combat*) the standards are unified for all.
- **Germany:** The *Bundeswehr* applies compensatory coefficients for women in sprint, pull-up, and running tests, to account for physiological differences between the sexes.
- **France:** The *Armée de Terre* maintains separate physical criteria for men and women, although in more operational roles there is a gradual tendency to unify standards, without

completely eliminating differences.

- **Spain:** The *Ejército de Tierra* applies differentiated tests based on gender and age, even in operational contexts, such as Special Operations.
- **Italy:** The *Esercito Italiano* provides different thresholds in basic tests: for example, longer times in running and a lower number of required push-ups for women.

The **access to special forces** remains identical for men and women in almost all the armies mentioned, except for Spain — as we will see shortly.

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In Europe, differentiated selection criteria are generally adopted between men and women, even in highly operational roles (such as Alpine Troops or Paratroopers), but access to special forces remains identical for both sexes — with one exception, that of Spain.

The Spanish case: women in Special Operations without having passed the course

Unlike the other armies mentioned, in Spain there was an emblematic case that sparked strong controversy. In 2019, the **Ministry of Defense** established a *Equipo de Capacidades Especiales*, introducing a group of women who **had not passed the Special Operations course**.

The initiative, wanted by Minister **Margarita Robles**, aimed to increase female presence in a unit traditionally closed to women, due to the very high physical requirements demanded by the *Curso de OE* (the Spanish equivalent of our **Corso OBOS**).

The newcomers were specialized in **intelligence and foreign languages**, and employed in operational support roles. However, the decision generated discontent among the military of the *Mando Operaciones Especiales* (*Special Operations Command of the Army, similar to our COMFOSE*), for whom access to the specialty should occur **only by passing the official course**, to protect the merit and operational quality of the unit.

Robles defended the choice by emphasizing the need to integrate a **gender perspective in missions**, especially in the UN context. However, **the debate has reignited a central issue for many Western armies**: how to promote female inclusion without weakening the standards of special forces?

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Among the Spanish special forces, the discontent was evident: the entry of women without the official qualification was perceived as a violation of the fundamental principle of selection, considered essential to maintain the excellence of the unit.

An exportable American model?

The American choice could set a precedent for other NATO nations, but it raises questions about **equity, effectiveness, and sustainability**. While in the USA the focus is on equal standards for all in the name of operational efficiency, **in Europe there is still a balance between inclusion and physical realism**.