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The Army is beginning an experimental program to see if weightlifting and aerobics can turn the average woman into the average man — strengthwise.

In a study that could rebut or bolster the case for putting women in land combat, the Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine in Natick, Mass., is selecting 40 civilian women from the Boston area for the project.

For six months, the women will work out under the watchful eyes

Why can't a woman be more like a man?

Army puts volunteers through rigorous training in search of answer

of an Olympic-trials decathlete and the Army's own physiologists. Once in shape, the participants will haul a 75-pound backpack, lift heavy boxes and run on a treadmill in tests to see if they have become as strong as some men.

"There are very many physically demanding jobs in the Army,

and it's easier for the Army to assign people to jobs without worrying about their gender," said project director Everett Harman, who hopes the study will show that a well-developed woman could do most of the tasks now limited to male soldiers.

Retired Army Col. Robert

Maginnis, an analyst at the Family Research Council, said the \$140,000 study is a waste of money.

"The ludicrous notion that we can go out there and hire women and spend a phenomenal amount of time building them up to the equal of men just doesn't make any sense," said Col. Maginnis, who op-

poses women in combat. "It doesn't make any sense financially, because we can hire men off the street now who already have the physical strength.

"It is not about equal opportunity, it is about military readiness. Underline. Exclamation point," he said. "We cannot afford social ex-

periments with the military forces of this country."

The study is formally called "Effects of a Specifically Designed Physical Conditioning Program on the Load Carriage and Lifting Performance of Female Soldiers."

Mr. Harman said he wants to see if the women can be brought into the lower range of male strength.

"Right now, they're almost completely out of the male range," said Mr. Harman, a 51-year-old physiologist. "The strongest female is

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generally weaker than the weakest male."

The study comes at a time of continued debate in Washington over expanded military roles for women, who make up about 12 percent of 1.5 million troops on active duty.

The Pentagon in recent months has opened thousands of new jobs to women, including billets on combat ships and warplanes. But it has drawn the line at land combat, partly because women generally do not have the upper-body strength needed to carry packs and successfully engage in hand-to-hand combat.

Charles Moskos, a sociology professor at Northwestern University who has written extensively on the military, said the Natick study might answer the question of whether women can reach that plateau.

"I think it's worthwhile as a way to try to settle this issue once and for all," Mr. Moskos said. "But they should also include males to see how much they improve, so you have a real comparison. The study lacks a control group, which is men."

He added, "In our haste to break the glass ceiling, let's hope we don't break women's bones."

Mr. Harman said male soldiers will be used at the start to compare their abilities with those of the women. But men will not take part in the weight training or in the final physical tests.

"We just don't have the resources to do that," he said.

An Army spokeswoman at the Pentagon said yesterday that Army headquarters was not aware of the study.

The experiment's funding comes from a \$20 million Defense Women's Health Research Project, pushed by Rep. Patricia Schroeder, Colorado Democrat, and included in this year's Penta-

gon budget.

Mr. Harman said the research center advertised for volunteers through the local Boston media. About 80 women signed up, of which about 40, ranging in age from 18 to 32, will be chosen for a March 13 start.

The experiment will be done in three stages.

First, the women and about 10 male soldiers will perform tasks that include carrying a 75-pound backpack for two miles as fast as possible on a course that includes a paved road, a dirt road, a field and a wooded trail; repetitive lifting of a 40-pound box; vertical jumping; and repetitive barbell squats.

The women will also be X-rayed and scanned to determine muscle mass and bone density.

The second phase is the training: 1½ hours of weightlifting and aerobics five times a week for 24 weeks.

"We're going to take them out on a hike once a week," Mr. Harman

said.

In September, the women will perform the tasks again to measure improvement.

Mr. Harman said women typically have 55 percent to 60 percent of the upper-body strength of men. His goal is to bring the women to 75 percent.

"I don't care how long you exercise this group of women up in Massachusetts, you will never bring them up to a point where if men went through the same experiment, the women would ever be equal," Mr. Maginnis said.

Sherril Boulay, one of the women being paid \$500 to participate, said she believes some women can qualify for ground combat "with special training and skills."

"I think that we can never become as strong as men, but I think that if we approach things differently we will become strong enough to do the jobs in the male-dominated fields they're holding right now," said Ms. Boulay, 28, a mother of two.