**Women in combat**

I'm Michel Martin and this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. Coming up, first lady Michelle Obama has taken on issues like childhood obesity and support for military families in the first term, but some feminists argue she should be doing more. We'll look at the politics of being first lady in just a few minutes.

But first, we turn to some major news from the Pentagon. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta is lifting the ban that bars women from serving in combat. Women are currently barred from about one in five active duty positions, according to the Washington Post. So this move could potentially open up tens of thousands of positions to female service members.

For more on this we're joined by Politico's Tim Mak. He reports on defense and national security. Welcome. Thanks so much for joining us.

TIM MAK: Thanks for having me.

MARTIN: So, Tim, this is being described as an historic change but I want to ask you something from a different perspective, and I don't mean my question to be disrespectful. If you think about the percentage of women in the military, there are only about 14 percent, about 200,000 out of a 1.4 million active duty force. So why is this so significant?

MAK: Well, it's significant because those women who are serving in the Armed Forces are still not allowed to try out for many of the most direct combat roles. If you're a woman in the military, there are just positions that are inaccessible to you. The decision, the announcement, the review that's coming up and its implementation over the next few years will mean that women will be able to stand side by side and be judged on similar qualifications for those posts that they hope to make it into.

MARTIN: It's been reported that the defense secretary decided to lift the ban after receiving the recommendation from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Any sense of why now? Why this now?

MAK: It does seem like an odd time to release an announcement like this. You know, Chuck Hagel, the defense secretary nominee, is going through a controversial confirmation process. And he, very likely, very possibly, will become the next secretary of defense. And Congress was also not informed of this beforehand. Politico did a great story where we talked to Senator Jim Inhofe, who's the Republican ranking member on the Senate Armed Services Committee, and he had no clue that this was coming down the line. And Congress you can expect to be a little bit bitter and surprised that they weren't briefed on this beforehand.