

“This Is the Story of Why My Military Career Ended Before It Should Have”: Premature Separation From Military Service Among U.S. Women Veterans

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ABSTRACT

“Women who serve in the military benefit from unique opportunities but face strains as a minority population and, compared to men, report greater dissatisfaction with their service and have shorter military careers. We interviewed 35 U.S. women veterans about their decisions to enter and leave military service. Premature separation—leaving military service before one plans, expects, or wants to—was a prominent theme and was often precipitated by gender-based experiences, including interpersonal violence, harassment, and caregiving needs. Findings can inform efforts to improve the length and quality of women’s military careers and support women during and after service.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- The purpose of this study was to generate knowledge on women veterans’ individual trajectories of military service through semi-structured interviews with 35 women veterans. The researchers elicited narratives on the women’s experiences into and out of service, life circumstances prior to entering, reasons for separating, and social and health care needs following separation from military service. Collecting this information is important because, compared with men, women often have shorter military service periods and report less satisfaction with their time in the service.
- Factors that contributed to women veterans’ dissatisfaction and premature separation from military service included experiences of sexual assault and harassment, the challenge of balancing care giving roles with specific demands of military service (e.g., overseas deployment), disparities in promotion and military positions, fewer opportunities for same-gender mentorship and camaraderie, and traumatic combat-related events.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Persons working with women servicemembers and veterans should seek updated and relevant knowledge on serving the sub-population’s diverse needs and be prepared to connect women with relevant services. For example, if a woman is facing deployment and needs help with planning for dependent care or has experienced military sexual assault and requires follow-up care and support. Providers may also consider encouraging women servicemembers and veterans to operate from a strengths-based perspective that empowers and leads to self-determination, and help their patients or clients find ways to feel supported and confident in the context of a predominately male occupational environment. Women servicemembers and veterans may benefit from increased opportunities to connect with other women service members/veterans as a means of support and resource-sharing, through formal support groups and informal social groups and networking. Within the military unit structure, women servicemembers facing challenges to remaining in the military can be encouraged to seek out and enlist guidance and resources from their senior non-commissioned officer or another trusted person (e.g. a chaplain, a senior enlisted woman in their unit). Servicemembers with leadership positions in the military should speak with their junior servicemembers about resources and services available to them, including family support, counseling, and other support groups.

FOR POLICY

Policymakers need to be aware of the life circumstances that interact and potentially interfere with women’s entry into and separation from military service. Efforts to increase military retention and recruitment of women should be reviewed and revised in consideration of preventing negative events that lead to premature separation of women from military service (primary prevention), improving response to negative events to support women servicemembers in continuing their service (secondary prevention), and increasing support for women veterans who may have experienced negative events during military service (tertiary prevention). Strategies for retaining, and enhancing support for, women servicemembers who may be at risk of unwanted premature separation may include new programs informed by research findings and recommendations from women veterans who separated prematurely as well as those who remained in the service despite challenges. They can also build upon existing support structures and key leaders to address challenges to retention faced specifically by women servicemembers. The Department of Veterans Affairs might expand their outreach services and coordination of care to include more women-specific programs. Policymakers might partner with nongovernmental organizations to promote and provide more education on preventing and effectively responding to gender-based violence.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Though this study produces rich findings, more research is needed to further understand the reasons women servicemembers enter and separate from military service. Future research should include women veterans from sources other than VA hospitals to ensure a broader and more inclusive sample. Further qualitative research on these topics would allow for the emergence of additional themes and for comparisons across groups to reflect demographic effects, including race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, military branch, and period of service. Retrospective cohort studies can determine if historical disparities continue to exist in military positions, advancement opportunities, procedures on misconduct and gender-specific traumatic experiences, and responsibilities assigned to women in the military. Longitudinal studies that elicit women’s narratives along a trajectory may provide a broader context of the decision-making process throughout their military service time, elaborating upon external circumstances that impact their decisions. Ongoing research is also needed to identify and understand the impacts of changing military policies and initiatives related to women servicemembers.

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