

# Just a Girl in the Army: U.S. Iraq War Veterans Negotiating Femininity in a Culture of Masculinity

## PUBLICATION

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## ABSTRACT

“This article considers the experiences of 12 U.S. Army women combat veterans. These women served in historically significant roles as some of the first women to officially serve in combat in the U.S. military. This article focuses on the role of gender in these women’s experiences in the context of the masculine culture of the military. We explore how they used performance of masculinity and metaphors of family to fit into their combat units. We also deliberate on how sexual harassment was used against these women in ways that communicated that they were not fully accepted. Finally, we consider the tension between empowerment and disempowerment in these women’s narratives of their military service.”

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Since the ban on women in combat was lifted in 2013, the visibility of women in the U.S. Armed Forces has increased. However, the social impact of the inclusion of women in combat has not been studied, particularly as it relates to changes in military culture. This study examines how women who served in the Iraq conformed to and negotiated gender identity in a predominately masculine military.
- Consistent with previous studies on the experiences of female veterans, female veterans believed traditional femininity was inferior to masculine behavior. To affirm their belonging, many women attempted to separate themselves from their female identity through behavior or appearance.
- The 12 US Army combat women veterans interviewed for this study all reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment (e.g. crude jokes, forcible sex) during their time in the military. The service women reported that they often normalized this behavior by believing that “boys will be boys.” Many of the women did not report the harassment, believing that reporting would negatively impact their social experience or professional careers (e.g. being isolated from service men/ not getting promoted).
- Despite the increasing number of women serving in the military, this study indicates that women service members do not experience the same equality as male service members. Additional research is needed on the relationship between military culture and service women’s mental and physical health.



## IMPLICATIONS

### FOR PRACTICE

Service women should consider creating and joining support networks with other service women. Many service women might find a supportive space to share similar experiences beneficial. In these support networks, service women should consider discussing how they negotiate being a women in the military. Due to the high number of women reporting military sexual trauma (MST), doctors should screen for sexual trauma and treat issues related to said trauma. Past studies have shown that early screening is crucial. Thus, doctors should discuss MST with both women and men service members before they report a MST. Teaching about MST and performing early screenings could help in the physical and mental safety and women and men who have experienced a MST. To ensure the mental health of women (and men) who have experienced a MST, primary care providers (PCPs) should refer women who may be experiencing negative mental health impacts following their sexual trauma or have experienced significant difficulties navigating the role their gender identity to the appropriate mental health professionals.

### FOR POLICY

The Department of Defense (DoD) might implement new guidelines and procedures that encourage the reporting of any MST, including sexual harassment and assault. Implementing guidelines and procedures that encourage service members to report a MST could increase the consistency of reports. To reduce a service members fear of retaliation after reporting a MST, the DoD might continue outlining to all service members that any form of MST is not tolerated. The DoD might also continue educating both men and women service members on preventing and addressing MST, including reporting protocols. The DoD might also evaluate if service women who report a MST are being unfairly punished in their military career. To help women negotiate their gender in the military, the DoD might continue broadening the accepted definition of the ideal service member to include women. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) might continue providing sexual harassment and assault screenings, and ensuring both men and women service members receive necessary treatment.

### FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of this exploratory study is that the collected narratives are from a limited sample of 12 service women. Since exploratory studies are designed to be open-ended and to gain a large volume of responses, future studies should sample a larger number of service women. Sampling more women could help in the gathering of an initial set of themes and data and improve generalizability. Another limitation of this study is that the 12 women were all Caucasian and single. Future studies should sample a more diverse group of women, especially by race/ethnic background and marital status. Future researchers should also include other variables in their studies, including servicewomen who did not serve in combat and servicewomen with children. Another limitation of the study was that the sample only consisted of women who served in the Army. Future studies should sample women from all branches of the military. The interviews analyzed in this study were conducted approximately 5 years after combat service. Future researchers should conduct interviews closer to the time of combat, or even collect data during periods of combat.

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