

A Closer Look at Challenges Faced by Women in the Military

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Abstract

Research surrounding female service members in the United States military has shown differences in the effect of the military on male and female mental health. However, the reasons for these differences, as well as higher rates of physical injury for women, have yet to be determined. The purpose of this study is to record the challenges faced by women in the United States military, as they themselves perceive them. Qualitative interview data is used to determine whether such challenges differ from those that male service members face, and what might cause any differentiation. Results show that gender discrimination is most commonly a result of the inherent differences in physical capacity for men and women. Mental distress discussed by participants is commonly caused by a fear of such discrimination integrated in the military culture over time. Therefore, perceptions of physical differences correlate with the differences in military experience for males and females.

Keywords: women, military, servicewomen, challenges, discrimination

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Gender roles and differences are highly debated in American culture. A particularly controversial discussion is gender in the military. Prior to a decision made by Defense Secretary Ashton Carter in December of 2015, females were not allowed to occupy combat positions in the military. The decision was finalized in March 2016 that these jobs would become available to women in all branches (Howell, 2016). Despite changes such as this, however, conflict over gender is not confined to the past. Through a qualitative interview study with female veterans and soldiers, we can take a closer look at women's side of the story regarding these issues. This study explores what servicewomen's own perceptions can tell society about the challenges they face in the military. Their perspectives are indicative of whether these challenges are unique to them as females. Several recent studies focus on perceptions and portrayal of women's physical condition and mental health in the military. Among them, few findings have similar results

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and some directly conflict. While we can conclude that men and women are different, the limits to these differences have yet to be determined by these studies. Due to such inconsistencies, the question remains as to whether mental and physical health is held in the same regard for males and females in the military. Based upon these observations from previous studies, I designed interview questions in an effort to draw more widely supported conclusions.

Controversy over gender equality, or the equal rights and treatment of men and women, is particularly prevalent in the military. However, the workplace is affected by its presence in many other fields as well. While the number of women in the labor force has improved drastically in recent years, sexual harassment in the workplace persists in the United States, as well as unequal pay between men and women. This constitutes gender discrimination (Conley, 2013). Regarding the military specifically, women's roles are becoming increasingly similar to men's. According to Southwell & MacDermid Wasworth (2016), the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 allowed a maximum of 2% of the enlisted force to be women. The act still excluded women from combat positions. In 2013, the rule was removed by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta (Nindl, Jones, Van Arsdale, Kelly, & Kraemer, 2016). Southwell & MacDermid Wasworth (p. 1, 2016) reported that "Women will be allowed to occupy positions in direct ground combat units below the brigade level" by the end of 2016. This held true. Women are continuing to advance in the physically demanding aspect of their military roles. This is supported by findings in some literature, but still conflicts with arguments that inherent physical strength prevents women from performing at the same capacity as men.

This concept of inherent differences between women and men is widely debated. A recent study reported that "men in their 20s have 50% more upper-body mass and 30% more lower-body muscle mass", and as a result, men have "greater absolute and relative strength, and a greater absolute and relative anaerobic power compared with women" (Nindl, et al., p. 51, 2016). Relative strength is the amount of strength a person possesses, compared to others with their same approximate body size. Relative anaerobic power is the ability of a person to exert intense spurts of energy for a period of time, compared to others with a similar body size. Nindl, et al. (p. 51, 2016) also found that 36 months of training showed higher rates of stress fractures and other injuries in women. However, men had lower resistance to muscle fatigue than women. Researchers attribute this to scientific study of the high-muscle oxygen demands of a larger muscle (Nindl, et al., p. 51, 2016). Another study supported the findings that injury rates are higher for women, but recommended more research on the conditions under

which women's injuries occur (Segal & Lane, 2016). According to Nindl, et al. (p. 51, 2016), training programs increased the number of pull-ups that women were capable of, demonstrating that they could overcome their naturally smaller muscle mass. Additionally, their research found that women performed better than men in ultra-endurance, or the ability to physical endure for a given extended period of time. These studies suggest that women excel in some abilities, and that while men are indeed stronger as a physical typicality, there are exceptions and other ways that women can compete.

Some would argue that the issue of women's physical capacity overlaps with the topic of vulnerability to sexual assault in the military. According to Weitz (2016), sexual assault prevalence in the military is actually not a product of women's inability to physically defend themselves. Rather, it correlates closely with the societal portrayal of women as sexual prey. Weitz (p. 178, 2016) focuses on "unsupportive or threatening comrades and officers", claiming that "the threat of sexual assault not only operates as a system of control over women's lives, but also serves to reinforce both male dominance and gender binaries". This indicates that discrimination against women is what causes them to feel physically vulnerable to men, instead of a real difference in physical vulnerability. However, around half of these women were not even concerned about sexual assault. Weitz (2016) depicts the issue of sexual assault in the military as unrelated to women's physical capacity. The study neglects, however, to address its own finding that many women claim not to feel physically vulnerable or threatened. Nor does it address claims of inherent differences in physical strength between men and women, which are supported by other research.

The literature also reports inconsistently on military accommodation of women's gynecological and obstetric needs. Availability of feminine products and contraceptives to female soldiers is reported differently between studies. There is also little evidence to show whether women are appropriately accommodated if they become pregnant. One study found that "oral contraceptives are offered at pre-deployment physicals, not only for contraception, but also for menstrual suppression during deployment" (Krulwich, p. 66, 2016). This is different than results found by Segal & Lane (p. 17, 2016), which show availability of menstrual sanitary items and contraceptives to women "varying by location". They also reported on these issues that "Much of the attention has been negative, focusing on the potential negative consequences of women's gynecological and obstetric characteristics on military performance and organizational readiness". Their study showed that women's "loss time" for pregnancy is required to

be reported by military units, while men's "loss time" for substance abuse or injuries often is not. The study acknowledged, however, that additional research is needed on "the realities of these issues, their effects on women's well-being, and policies and practices that can ameliorate problems" (Segal & Lane, p. 17, 2016). As these studies demonstrate, there is varying evidence regarding the military's tendencies to meet gynecological and obstetric needs, and a need for further research.

Studies did show consistency in the mental impact of the military on genders. Men and women in the military have shown different patterns of mental health concerns. Southwell & MacDermid Wasworth (2016) found that post-deployment, more women reported symptoms of depression, while men were more likely to report problems with alcohol. Additionally, they reported that women showed higher rates of PTSD symptoms than men, after injuries during deployment. According to Segal & Lane (p. 15, 2016) "there are gender differences in the adverse psychological effects of deployment, including increased risk of suicide during deployment among female soldiers". The literature revealed was little information, however, on the relationship between female soldiers' mental health and the perceived prejudice against them in the military. Studies showed that a lack of social support can cause great mental damage for humans, with brain activity comparable to that of physical pain (Southwell & McDermid Wasworth, 2016). Segal & Lane (2016) found that Iraq and Afghanistan female veterans were "more likely than men to have difficulty transitioning into civilian life, with negative mental health effects and higher unemployment" (2016). It could be argued that the increased mental strain of the military on women is caused by some capacity of ostracism experienced during their service. These results indeed show a difference in coping methods between men and women, but do not determine whether their coping skills reflect their level of pain or the cause for it. Perhaps it is worth exploring the causes for these differences in coping mechanisms, as well as causes of the problems with which service men and women are coping in the first place.

The literature related to military women shows diverse research findings. There is consistency in findings on mental differences between males and females. There are limited findings, however, on the cause for this, as well as for higher rates of physical injuries in women. Few other themes were prevalent among studies, due to the fact that a large amount of research is contradictory on women's access to gynecological and obstetric resources, or on portrayal of sexual assault. Additionally, a more comprehensive review of previous studies might yield clearer findings. Time and resources available for the purpose of this study generate limitations on the size of the literature

review. As a possible result, inconsistencies arise. Some studies found that access to such resources was available consistently, while others found the opposite. Consistently, however, data shows that challenges in the military seem to be more intense both mentally and physically for women than men. The reason for such, however, remains a conflict. Limitations on the breadth of this literature, disagreement between researchers, and lack of attention to causes for their findings leaves the question of whether the military is as attentive to women's mental and physical needs it is to men's. Because of these findings, this study focuses on women's perceptions of the way they are treated during and after their service, and how it affects their personal lives. Focus on this cause and effect relationship may bring society closer to determining the cause of the strain that women seem to experience on such a different level than their male counterparts in the military.

Methods

After obtaining the approval of the Institutional Review Board and consent from participants, I conducted four interviews. All participants met the basic criteria of a female United States soldier or veteran. More specifically, participants included an Army Specialist of the National Guard, a Petty Officer Second Class of the Navy, a Marine Captain and a Marine Corporal. All participants were between the ages of 40 and 50, and retired from their military careers. The Army Specialist worked as an Intelligence Analyst during her service time, a job which consists primarily of gathering and analyzing information on the enemy. She was stationed in Iraq and the United States during six years served. A Petty Officer Second Class, one participant served as an Air Traffic Controller in the Navy. She was responsible for communication with aircrafts from a control tower, and was stationed in California and Florida for the four years that she served. One of the Marines interviewed was stationed at Camp Pendleton in California for all of her four service years, and served as an Air Defense Control Officer, whose duties were similar to an Air Traffic Controller. The other Marine was stationed in a few locations overseas, including Afghanistan and Japan, and served as a Combat Correspondent, similar to a civilian news reporter. She served for eight years, and was the only participant that was ever in direct combat. All four women served prior to the recent changes in physical fitness requirements for women.

Participants each answered the same set of general questions. In summary, these questions sought to determine each participants' branch of the military, how long and where they served, what their personal tasks were, and how their challenges during the beginning stages of the career compared to later ones. Additionally, participants were asked to discuss

whether their gender played a role in their experience at any point, related to treatment by others or their own expectations. This portion of the interview included conversation about sexual harassment or any possibility of violation experienced by participants during service time. Gender neutral questions were intentionally discussed prior to emphasizing gender, in order to avoid framing, or the process of designing a question to produce a specific focus in the answer. Probing questions, or questions that stemmed from individual discussions, depended on the direction of each separate conversation. I analyzed data by recording key words and phrases from participants' on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The key phrases were chosen by identifying any word used or topic covered by at least two participants.

Results

Interviews yielded consistent overall outcomes. Results should, however, be considered exploratory, due to such a small sample size. Participant demographics, such as branch and rank showed no relevance to their responses or the themes derived from them. Regardless of backgrounds, female veterans followed very similar thought patterns. They often even used the same words to answer questions, resulting in the use of key words for data analysis. The popular use of the same terms and lingo is common in the military, which could be a possible reason for the participants' shared language. Analysis resulted in two main themes of the challenges faced by women in the military, both of which pointed to gender stereotypes as a significant issue for women.

Overwhelmingly, women consider their challenges to be associated with physical strength. When asked if they could choose a favorite aspect of their military experience overall, most participants answered that they found it rewarding to overcome the stigma against their physical capacity. One woman stated, "Feeling like I proved myself and did something that people think women can't do was the best part of my experience". Others indicated the same feeling. One veteran commented, "I feel like I proved people wrong", adding that training herself to do pull-ups and pushups "was so satisfying. I know I impressed men in my platoon". Still another told me that she felt like she "overcame a stereo type". With relevance, participants all indicated that they struggled the most during the first several days or weeks upon arriving at a new location, or joining new people in their service time.

Whether in basic training, at Officer Candidate School (OCS), or their first station, a majority of participants indicated at some point that their physical capacity as a female was questioned the most when they were new to a setting. Most of the women used a phrase something along the lines of "I had to prove myself", when describing challenges faced during their initial

stages of training. "I really was treated the way that I proved myself worthy of during boot camp," said one. Another expressed the same feelings, saying, "I definitely earned the most respect when I was able to keep up with the physical pace". Still another woman gave a similar answer. She said,

"I guess any time I entered a new group, whether it was OCS, or my platoon, or anything, I actually thought was when I felt the most intimidated, and had to work the hardest to fit in. It was hard to break into a group, especially because the Marine Corps is dominated by males. I had to show them that I could do it".

All four participants considered it necessary to prove that stereotypes about their gender's physical capacity were conditional. Discrimination was most prevalent in skepticism of female physical ability. Respect is most easily earned if women prove they are an exception to gender stereotypes.

Another predominant theme in my findings was the response to questions regarding women's mental stress, compared to the consistency in women's focus on their gender. Participants claimed unanimously that any mental stress they faced was unrelated to the presence of gender discrimination. Their focus on gender in answering questions, however, raises doubt about the accuracy of this perception. While there was a consensus that stress during service time was not unique to the pressure on women as female soldiers, participants' tendency to relate the entire discussion to their gender demonstrates the intense presence of it as a factor in their memories of service time. One participant, though she stated that her gender did not cause her mental strain, contradicted herself. She said,

"I definitely think that the hardest challenge for me to rise to as a woman was being in shape like men. Not my emotions".

Physical challenges, however, require mental persistence, which causes stress. Noticeably, this participant's own words indicate that the obstacle to which she attributes her hardships was the comparison of herself, as a woman, to men. According to participants, women's mental state during and post-military is not influenced by their gender. However, their attention to their gender, even when it was not a part of the question, indicated otherwise. Another participant stated right out her mentally stressful fear of discrimination. When discussing her mental health and the way it was affected by the military, she said that her fear of discrimination caused her anxiety during her service time. When asked whether any of her challenges were presumably related to gender, she said,

"I think I was a lot more afraid of gender discrimination, than I was reacting to an actual presence of it. My mental health strain was mostly related to fear. Once I had resigned from service, the fear ended. I was never

depressed or hated myself or anything after I was done".

To clarify, I questioned whether she was comfortable sharing if she felt depressed or bitter toward herself before she was done. She answered, "No. But anxious. Very anxious. I was afraid of messing up". I asked her why she was anxious, and she said, "I was afraid people would be right that I couldn't do it because I was a woman".

This participant showed a blatant fear of gender discrimination. Others seem to unintentionally relate their memories and opinions to the way that their gender influenced their military experience. Though some of these references were not in response to direct reference to mental health, it is noteworthy that all of our experiences, including physical challenges, require a thought process. Therefore, they play a role in our mental health. A majority of my questions were not posed in a way that focused on gender, and women still tended to draw attention to the impact of gender with their answers. For example, when asked whether any challenges were presumably related to gender, a participant said,

"Well the first time I remember feeling like I was really noticed and respected was when I outran my first platoon sergeant".

Many others described similar experiences. When asked what challenges they faced during their first stage of military training, a majority of women automatically connected their struggles to the pressure they felt to "prove themselves" as women. When asked about the best part of their experience, participants again brought it back to being a woman, most stating that they found it rewarding to "prove people wrong", or to "overcome stereotypes". Participants felt most accomplished for overcoming stereotypes against women in the military, demonstrating an obvious importance to them of the pressure put on them due to their gender.

The stress of female stereotypes resonated as a theme throughout the entire length of the interviews. However, some discussion focusing specifically on mental health provided possible explanations for stress unrelated to gender. One participant pointed out that she experienced an actual lack of stress, and attributed it to her role in the military. She suggested that stress can be caused by jobs with higher risk than hers, or by facing combat, which not all service members have to do. She said,

"My job had nothing to do with killing anyone, and honestly I was never in a combat situation. I think depression and mental health issues for veterans correlate higher with those types of jobs".

Two other participants stated that they did not credit their gender with any of their mental struggles at all. One attributed some of her struggle to other specific factors. When asked whether her mental or emotional

distress was caused because of her gender, she shrugged and answered,

"I missed my family a lot. That was my most emotional struggle. But I didn't have really any mental health issues that were caused by the way I was treated as a woman".

These examples demonstrate the plausibility that stress in the military does not have to be caused by factors unique to gender. Emphasis on their gender in the majority of their other answers, however, show its prevalence in their mental process when discussing their memories of service time.

Sexual harassment and women's health provisions were also discussed in interviews. Though none of these conversations generated theme key words or phrases, one woman discussed her experience with her menstrual cycle in the Army. Similar to the anxiety that some participants expressed over expectations of them as women, this participant shared that she was very anxious about her menstrual cycle each month. She attributed her anxiety to a lack of resources for disposing of female products, and stated that the frequency of the problem was "very inconvenient". Only one participant shared a story regarding physical violation, and she stated,

"I was never assaulted or consistently harassed. I was nervous about being meat in a world of so few options for my male coworkers, because there were a few catcalls or creepy looks. But I guess I only ever experienced that two or three times from all four years, so I didn't think much of it".

Though the participant was seemingly affected little by the experience, she clearly remembered its occurrence. While the participant herself may not describe such an incident as a significant problem, others may disagree, or even experience worse situations.

For a majority of the discussion, participants claimed that discrimination against gender did not cause them very many problems with physical challenges once they "proved themselves". Women expressed pride and joy over the accomplishment of doing so, and demonstrate that it is possible for women to meet military standards, regardless of gender stereotypes. However, despite of their report that gender did not cause them mental stress during time served, the intensity of their focus on gender's influence when discussing their experience seems to show that these stereotypes did indeed influence them in a way that male soldiers' gender would not. Their overarching feelings about and memories of their military experience seemed to point toward the impact that their gender had on it.

Discussion

According to the results of this study, gender stereotypes in the military regarding female physical capacity causes women to fear failure and feel pressured to overcome expectations that do not exist for males. It

causes women to focus on the way that their gender impacts their military experience more than any other influence. These findings are supported by Victor Vroom's Expectancy Theory of Motivation.

Vroom's theory holds that people will behave in a manner which they expect to produce a certain "reinforcing" desired outcome (Jones, Corbin & Fromme, p. 59, 2001). It seems as though fear and expectations about gender discrimination caused the women in my study to focus primarily on the way that their gender influenced their military experience. Both during their experience, and during the interviews, these women seemed to center their behavior on a desired outcome of overcoming stereotypes and proving that they were an exception to prejudice about women in the military. Evidently, this supports the theory that people manipulate their own behavior to create the reaction which they desire from others. Though participants themselves did not identify their gender as a factor in their mental health condition, their overwhelming focus on its role in their experience illustrated otherwise.

Discussion with participants touched on other unresolved issues in surrounding literature. These topics, however, such as sexual harassment and availability of contraceptives, gynecological products, or obstetric care yielded no consistent results during interviews. A few stories were shared, but due to a lack of consensus, these conversations were not included in themes.

Some additional limitations exist in the implications of study results. It is possible that the research design itself skewed results. Because the implied consent participants received prior to the study described its purpose in such detail, women possibly already assumed that their answers were supposed to reflect the influence of their gender. This is a limitation, however, that cannot easily be avoided without violating ethical guidelines. The sample size also set some limits. Four women is not representative of an entire population. Additionally, a different study might include female and male service members, excluding gender from the title and design of the study's presentation. Challenges discussed voluntarily by both genders would be analyzed this way, instead of focusing on gender at all. It is also worth considering that out of these four women, only one served in combat. Another version of the study focused on mental health specifically might be better structured to focus on a group of females from which all or none were deployed to face combat, for example. This might prevent combat experience from serving as an external variable, which is a factor that would cause the studied variable to be viewed differently than it would be on its own. The elimination of such a variable in a sample could examine whether gender causes mental stress for women, as opposed to the causation of combat trauma.

These things considered, the results of this study cannot necessarily be linked to military women who have served in combat, much less to servicewomen as a whole. These limitations, especially the sample size, minimize the extent to which study results can resolve conflicting opinions about gender in the military. Findings are not completely irrelevant, however, and do contribute to the literature surrounding the effect of servicewomen's gender on their mental health. Results also contribute to further development behind the argument that inherent physical differences between men and women can be overcome. Though all four women indicated intimidation by the military stereotypes on their gender, all four also conquered the challenge.

Conclusion

Studies of women in the military show controversy over inherent physical differences between genders. Cause for women's poorer mental health than men's during and after service is also underexplored. A closer look at challenges faced by women in the military shows that female soldiers are faced with a mentally and emotionally stressful stigma about their physical capacity. As demonstrated by participants, women are capable of surmounting these physical obstacles. However, the relief from the stress of this expectation after finally overcoming it seems to be the most memorable aspect of each woman's experience, indicating that it is a tremendous factor. Women must prove to be an exception to the stereotype in order to earn respect. Awareness of this expectation causes the obstacle to expand beyond physical strength and endurance.

Knowledge of the study's purpose could have skewed results by influencing women to relate the discussion to their gender, even when individual questions were not intended to do so. A revised version of the study might include female and male service members, and focus on general challenges. This would allow for a comparison of the challenges discussed voluntarily by both genders. Another version of revision might focus more specifically on a group of female service members who faced combat, in order to differentiate between mental stress caused by gender and that caused by combat trauma. Results of this study, however, indicate that there are both mental and physical challenges in the United States military unique to female service members.

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