

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Servicewomen's Strategies to Staying Safe During Military Service

Cheney, A., Reisinger, H., Booth, B., Mengeling, M., & Torner, J., Salder, A. (2015). Servicewomen's strategies to staying safe during military service. *Gender Issues*, 32(1), 1-18. doi:10.1007/s12147-014-9128-8

SUMMARY: Female Service members from multiple branches participated in fourteen focus groups regarding efforts to stay safe during military service. They described numerous strategies to reduce their vulnerability to harassment or abuse, including drawing upon social support, creating buddy systems, and dressing in masculine clothing to mask their femininity.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Women used several protective strategies to stay safe during military service, including relying on their support networks of “female battle buddies.”
- Participants indicated that older, more senior Service women took on nurturing, protective roles of their junior colleagues.
- Many women described attempts to hide their femininity and blend in with their male colleagues to decrease their vulnerability to sexual harassment or abuse, such as by wearing loose clothing and their uniforms, even when off duty.
- Participants reported that they avoid directly challenging the social hierarchy of the military, rape myths, or sexualized portrayals of military women.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop support programs for female military personnel, affording them opportunities to exchange social support
- Involve both men and women in work groups on installations to promote safety and minimize acts of violence
- Participate in activities as part of Sexual Assault Awareness Month to promote awareness of sexual violence and inform military families about local resources

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend organizational-level interventions to promote gender equality and safety for all military personnel, such as the creation of gender advisors to decision makers
- Ensure that female Service members have separate, private living spaces and access to providers with expertise in women's health
- Suggest that commanders offer gender awareness training on all installations, sensitizing military personnel to the necessity of respectful treatment of all coworkers and the inappropriateness of sexual harassment

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METHODS

- With contact information provided by the Defense Manpower Data Center, researchers mailed potential participants letters about the study.
- From 2007-2010, fourteen focus groups were conducted in five Midwestern states.
- In-depth statistical analyses were used to examine the relationships among themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- Female service personnel (N = 61), ranging in age from 23-61 years (average age = 40, SD= 9.8).
- Regarding demographic variables, 74% were White, 64% were in the Reserves or National Guard, and 36% were in the Active forces or Veterans.
- Half (51%) of Service women had deployed; of those, half had deployed more than once.

LIMITATIONS

- The average age of participants (40 years) was relatively old for the demographic group of women at highest risk for sexual assault during military service (18-24 years), which may limit the ability to generalize findings.
- Due to the voluntary nature of participation (those who responded to an invitation letter), it is unknown how participants may have differed from other women.
- Data were collected from five Midwestern states which limits the diversity of the sample.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study with a more diverse sample, including younger Service members from across the country
- Gather data from male Service members, inquiring about their experiences of sexual harassment and assault
- Ascertain the perspectives of both men and women on the feasibility and acceptability of strategies to directly address sexualized depictions of military women

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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