

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
National
Guard

A Gendered Perspective on Military Deployment

Kelly, P. J., Nilsson, J., & Berkel, L. (2014). A gendered perspective on military deployment. *Women & Health*, 54(1), 61-76. doi:10.1080/03630242.2013.862897

SUMMARY: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with female members of the U.S. National Guard to learn about their experiences with deployment to combat zones and the following reintegration. Four primary themes emerged from the interviews: stressors associated with the deployment setting, variety of job responsibilities, impact of at-home stressors on deployment, and gender-related stress.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Stress was seen as being inescapable for the entire duration of deployment during all day-to-day tasks (e.g., working, eating, sleeping).
- Job responsibilities had large variability, from traditional/gender-conforming jobs (e.g., administrative assistant, cook) to non-traditional/gender-nonconforming jobs (e.g., bodyguard, helicopter mechanic).
- Home life impacted other stressors, even when deployed (e.g., worry about partner, children, and parents).
- Many participants reported being surprised by gender-related stress (e.g., unexpected sexual harassment, challenging logistics associated with gender-segregated living arrangements).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer pre-deployment training for female Service members that focuses on resilience towards gender-specific deployment-related stress
- Offer support groups post-deployment specifically for women to share and discuss deployment-related experiences
- Provide workshops specific to female Service members that help build skills to address family-related stressors that may be unique to women

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend training for professionals who work with Service members regarding the different types of stress faced by female Service members
- Continue to encourage the implementation of safety measures for victims of sexual harassment or gender-related discrimination, such as ensuring the availability of confidential support and offering the option of reassignment to have physical distance from the perpetrator
- Continue to support post-deployment reintegration programs that help military families re-adjust following a deployment

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METHODS

- Female members of the U.S. National Guard were solicited by announcements on their units' Facebook pages to complete a research study focused on women's experiences with reintegration after being deployed to a combat area.
- A semi-structured interview was conducted over the phone, ranging from 15 to 45 minutes.
- The content of participant interviews was conducted to uncover general themes about the reintegration experience for females in the National Guard.

PARTICIPANTS

- Forty-two female members of the National Guard from seven different units deployed to combat zones completed semi-structured interviews about their deployment experiences.
- Participants were from one of five states: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, or North Dakota. Their mean age was 35 years (range = 23-58 years). Most (72%) deployed once, 28% deployed twice, 7% deployed three times (deployment length range from 3 weeks to 16 months, mean = 10 months).
- Most participants were married (40%) or divorced (32%), and half had at least one child.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample (recruited through Facebook pages) may not be representative of the larger population of National Guard.
- Researchers did not specify whether participants were from the U.S. Army National Guard, Air Force National Guard, or both.
- Content coding was done by groups of researchers; therefore, there were not checks for inter-rater reliability.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore family-related stressors (such as family separation) that may weigh on deployed females in ways that are unique and different from those experienced by deployed males
- Assess the length of time that deployment-related stress persists after reintegration
- Continue to examine how gendered experiences during deployment influence the mental health of Service members from all branches of the military

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