

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Systemic Barriers Faced by Women Attempting to Leave Abusive Military Marriages

Kern, E. (2017). Systemic barriers faced by women attempting to leave abusive military marriages. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 95(3), 354-364. doi:10.1002/jcad.12149

**SUMMARY:** Little is known about the experience of women in military families who seek to leave an abusive marriage, a process that may be complicated by unique features of military life (i.e., ideals about loyalty, frequent relocation, financial dependence). This study qualitatively investigated the systemic barriers women face when trying to leave an abusive military marriage. Findings indicate that issues of power and cultural ideals of loyalty may keep military wives in abusive marriages. Also, findings underscore the importance of practitioners advocating for and connecting their clients to helpful resources.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Military wives shared a strong sense that their husbands were protected by the military system, and reported often feeling pressure from those they reached out to within the military system to drop charges, stay silent, or change their own behavior.
- Military wives discussed how the ideals of the strength and loyalty of military wives made it even more difficult to ask for help.
- Military wives expressed feeling as though the referrals within the military system (e.g., couples counseling through the Family Advocacy Program) were inadequate in addressing their needs and designed to protect the Service member.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Confer with military wives and husbands about what kind of support the military could provide that would be helpful when dealing with an abusive marriage
- Facilitate support groups for military wives and husbands who have dealt with domestic violence to increase kinship and support among spouses
- Enhance education, activities, and curriculum related to domestic violence

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend professional development courses focused on advocacy for military wives and husbands experiencing domestic violence, including how to connect women and men to the appropriate military or civilian resources
- Encourage the training of military professionals to highlight the unique challenges faced by military wives and husbands who are trying to leave an abusive marriage
- Recommend partnerships among military-based and community-based programs to help military husbands and wives leaving abusive marriages to feel more comfortable sharing about their experiences

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited through military-affiliated key informants, as well as through the distribution of flyers to various organizations and clinics throughout the southwestern U.S.
- Women were eligible if they had left a marriage to an Active Duty Service member who deployed in service of OEF/OIF in which they self-reported physical or emotional abuse.
- Each woman participated in a one to two hour initial interview, which followed a semi-structured interview guide, as well as a 15-30 minute follow-up interview for clarification.
- Various themes emerged from the qualitative analyses, including: power and control, protection of the Service member, and cultural ideals of loyalty.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included eight civilian women, ranging in age from 21 to 45 years old.
- Women reported being previously married to enlisted men who served with the Army (n=4), Air Force (n=2), Marines (n=1), and Navy (n=1).
- Marriages varied in length from nine months to 12 years (M = 5.59, SD = 4.14).
- Six participants identified as White, and two as Latina.

## LIMITATIONS

- The use of convenience sampling and small sample size makes it difficult to generalize to a wider population.
- Because all of the participants were previously married to enlisted Service members, no conclusions can be drawn about the effect of rank on the experience of military wives leaving an abusive marriage.
- Relying on only one source of information (wives' self-report via interviews) may have introduced bias, decreasing the study's reliability.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Recruit a larger and randomly selected sample of military wives
- Ensure the recruitment of a sample that reflects both enlisted Service members as well as officers
- Incorporate multiple modes of data (i.e., interview and questionnaires) to increase the study's reliability

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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