

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Returning to Civilian Life: Family Reintegration Challenges and Resilience of Women Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars

Leslie, L. A., & Koblinsky, S. A. (2017). Returning to civilian life: Family reintegration challenges and resilience of women veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. *Journal of Family Social Work, 20*(2), 106-123.
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SUMMARY: Little is known about how the experience of military service in Iraq and Afghanistan has affected female Veterans as they return to family life. This qualitative study assessed the experience of female Veterans as they transition back to family roles and responsibilities following separation from the military. Results indicated that female Veterans drew on their strength and resilience when dealing with family challenges.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Female Veterans reported that their training to be hypervigilant in war zones made it difficult to adjust to the slower pace of family life.
- Some female Veterans struggled with PTSD, emotional reactivity, and anger following their return, which made it difficult to reconnect with family members, particularly spouses.
- Female Veterans who were able to attribute positive meaning to their military service appeared to be the most successful at the transition back to family life.
- Every female Veteran in the sample discussed the benefits of Veteran peer support in readjustment to civilian life.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer programs for reintegrating female Service members that focus on emotion regulation and transitioning back into civilian life
- Provide education to returning Service members and their families regarding the common challenges of reintegration, especially when the deployment has included combat exposure
- Offer post-deployment support groups for female Service members and their families

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development of support groups that address the unique experience of female Service members who are spouses and/or mothers
- Recommend professional development courses for community providers to educate them about how to best help and support female Service members returning from a deployment as they reintegrate back into civilian life
- Continue to support programs that address the unique challenges faced by deployed mothers

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METHODS

- Female Veterans who either served in OEF/OIF or who directly supported OEF/OIF (e.g., transporting or treating injured Service members) were recruited to participate in focus groups related to their transition to civilian life.
- Focus groups were audio-recorded for accuracy during analysis, and each group was facilitated by a therapist who had previous experience treating Veteran families as well as a former spouse of an Army Veteran.
- Participants were asked questions, such as, "How did your military service, including any deployments, affect your relationships with your spouse/partner and/or children when you returned to civilian life?"

PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 29 female Veterans participated in five focus groups, which ranged in size from three to 10 women each.
- Participants ranged in age from 26 to 56 years or older, and were Black (55%), White (21%), Multiracial (17%), and Asian (7%).
- The majority of women represented the Army (65%), with others representing the Navy (17%), Air Force (11%), and Marines (7%).
- The majority of the sample were enlisted Service members (71%), while 29% were officers.

LIMITATIONS

- A small, convenience sample cannot necessarily be generalized to the larger population of women serving in the military.
- Conclusions from the focus groups about PTSD and other mental health diagnoses cannot be verified since data about specific diagnoses was not collected.
- This study was cross-sectional, therefore no conclusions can be made about changes among participants over time.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Recruit larger, randomly selected cohorts of female Service members, increasing the ability to generalize a study's findings
- Collect detailed information about female Service member's mental health diagnoses in order to gather quantitative data about struggles with mental health during reintegration
- Conduct a longitudinal study in order to capture changes in family functioning for female Service members over time

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