

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Women at War: Understanding How Women Veterans Cope With Combat and Military Sexual Trauma

Mattocks, K. M., Haskell, S. G., Krebs, E. E., Justice, A. C., & Yano, E. M.; Brandt, C. (2012). Women at war: Understanding how women veterans cope with combat and military sexual trauma. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74(4), 537-545.  
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**SUMMARY:** Although there is considerable research on the effects of OEF/OIF deployment on Service members, few studies have focused on issues women face during deployment. To address this gap in research, the authors conducted a qualitative study of women and documented their experiences with wartime deployment. Results suggest that women experience several unique challenges associated with deployment and reintegration.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Although women in the military were not permitted to serve in direct combat roles at the time of this study, they experience similar stressors (e.g., women serving as military police may provide convoy and unit security which includes searching for improvised explosive devices).
- Women face unique stressors such as military sexual trauma and sexual harassment, sometimes perpetrated by their fellow Service members.
- After deployment, some women engage in a variety of negative coping strategies including bingeing and purging, excessive exercise, isolation, and prescription drug abuse.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop workshops for female Service members that specifically address their unique experiences and ways to effectively cope with trauma experienced
- Provide reintegration classes focused on issues specific to female Service members such as being the primary caregiver or issues with partner intimacy
- Offer support groups for female Service members who experience sexual trauma during deployment

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that work with female Service members who have experienced sexual trauma during deployment and allow Service members to report sexual assault by another Service member without retaliation
- Continue to offer child-care services to female Service members while deployed
- Encourage collaboration among DoD and community-based programs to support a smooth reintegration for female Service members

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## METHODS

- Qualitative individual interviews were conducted with female OIF/OEF Veterans.
- Female Veterans registered to receive care at a northeastern VA center were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview.
- Interviews were conducted between January and November 2009.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants in this study were 19 female OEF/OIF Veterans.
- The majority of participants were White (79%) and between the ages of 23 to 55 years.
- Half of the women were National Guard, another 40% were part of the Army or Navy Reserves and the remaining 10% were not identified by the authors.
- Thirty-two percent of the sample was diagnosed with PTSD, 11% had major depression, and 11% had an anxiety disorder diagnosis.

## LIMITATIONS

- Participants in this study represent a significant minority of women who were asked to participate; therefore, the experiences and coping behaviors described may not reflect the larger population of women in the military.
- The recruitment pool for this study consisted of women enrolled for VA services, and these women may have been struggling more than other female Veterans.
- Variability in time since deployment (three months to five years) may bias results, as women were in different stages of coping.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the association between deployment and coping strategies (e.g., bingeing and purging) in women
- Account for pre-deployment functioning to better understand the effect deployment has on behavioral and psychological outcomes
- Explore how the experience of military sexual trauma influences female Veterans willingness to seek treatment with DoD affiliated care facilities

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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