

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

The Many Faces of Military Families: Unique Features of the Lives of Female Service Members

Southwell, K. H., & Wadsworth, S. M. (2016). The many faces of military families: Unique features of the lives of female service members. *Military Medicine*, 181 (Suppl.1), 70-79. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-15-00193

SUMMARY: A secondary analyses of the 2010 wave of the Military Family Life Project regarding structural differences in male and female Service members' families and the experiences of their military spouses was investigated. In addition, to gain an understanding of the influence of women's service on their family functioning, in-depth telephone interviews with 20 civilian husbands residing in 11 states around the United States were conducted. Overall, this study notes several differences in female Service members' family structures and relationships with their civilian husbands.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Findings from study one revealed that female Service members are more likely than males to be part of nontraditional family structures.
- Female Service member's families more often included spouses with military experience, non-biological relative children, and children from their prior relationships.
- Findings from study two found that husbands' worries extended beyond deployment to include worries about wives being sexually harassed and assaulted during regular workdays.
- Civilian husbands' nontraditional roles posed challenges both in the marital relationship and in the military community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer military couples' mentoring that focuses on unique military family stressors, such as deployments and relocations
- Offer pre- and post-deployment support groups for deployed female Service members and their families
- Provide support for deployed female Service members that focuses on relationship building during reintegration

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue support for programs that specifically address deployed female Service members and their relationships with their partners and children
- Recommend education of professionals who work with military families on the possible effects of female Service members' deployment on their relationships and well-being
- Promote the development of structured workshops for female Service members and their families to provide support during times of stress (e.g., relocation, deployment)

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METHODS

- Participants in the second study were recruited through emails from personal contacts and organizational leaders as well as through social media (e.g., Facebook or Twitter).
- In study two, in-depth telephone interviews were conducted related to husbands' perceptions around the challenges and benefits of having a female military partner.
- In the first study, a secondary analysis of the 2010 wave of the Military Family Life Project were analyzed to look at differences in perceptions and experiences between female Service members' and their partners. Three researchers coded and analyzed the data from the second study into themes based on the research questions.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample in the first study was comprised of 28,552 male and female spouses of Active Duty Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force Service members who had served a minimum of 6 months, were below O-7 rank, and not in the military themselves.
- Study two consisted of 20 civilian husbands who had been married to Active Duty women for at least 3 years, and were not in the military themselves.
- In the second study 70% of husbands were in their first marriages, and 90% identified as White. Participants' wives served in the Army (40%), Navy (30%), and Air Force (30%).

LIMITATIONS

- The first study did not control for paygrade, education, occupational specialty, or other factors that might distinguish the families of male and female Service members.
- The second study focused on a very small homogenous sample of civilian husbands; therefore, the outcomes should be taken as exploratory in nature.
- About half of the husbands had a military background; which could have influenced their perspectives and experiences having a female partner in the military.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate influences of combat deployments, mental health problems, and military sexual trauma on female Service members and their families
- Evaluate what supports military families need most in the reintegration stage of deployment
- Investigate the effects of dual deployment on military families relationships with their children

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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