

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

What is War? Female Veterans' Experiences of Combat in Iraq and Afghanistan

Strong, J. D., Findley, P., McMahon, S., & Angell, B. (2015). What is war? Female Veterans' experiences of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Journal of Women and Social Work*, 30(4), 489-503. doi:10.1177/0886109915585383

SUMMARY: Female Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans participated in interviews regarding their experiences of combat. They defined combat in three general manners, including experiencing combat-related events, witnessing combat, and feeling threatened. Women tended to compare their combat experiences to those of others when identifying as combat Veterans.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Female Veterans described physical threat (e.g., being attacked by mortars or IEDs) as the most frequent type of combat exposure.
- Female Veterans reported indirect exposure to war violence when deployed to a combat zone, especially surrounding the persistent threat of potential physical and sexual harm.
- Several Veterans struggled with feeling unrecognized and unappreciated as combat Veterans, especially in the Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare system.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops to help Service members manage traumatic events, including those encountered during combat and provide mental health resources
- Develop peer support programs for trauma-exposed Service members to allow for the exchange of social support
- Host classes for families of female Service members, educating them about possible deployment-related stressful experiences and common readjustment challenges

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs specifically for female Service members who have experienced trauma or violence
- Recommend all female Service members who have experienced combat be screened for traumatic experiences
- Recommend professional education for community providers that work with Service members, offering information about the effects of trauma from combat-related events

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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METHODS

- Participants were Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans who were registered with the VA healthcare system and were recruited by mailed letters.
- Participants completed surveys and semi-structured interviews assessing combat exposure, post-battle exposure, and post-deployment challenges.
- Statistical analyses were used to analyze the interview transcripts.

PARTICIPANTS

- Twelve female OIF/OEF Veterans participated in the study.
- Participants were female Veterans who had served in Active Duty and Reserve components of the Army, Navy, and Air Force.
- Veterans' roles in the military included finance, logistics, military police, communications, and transportation.
- Information about age and racial background were not provided.

LIMITATIONS

- As the sample was small, the extent to which findings generalize to other Iraq and Afghanistan female Veterans is unknown.
- The sample was recruited from VA enrollment logs; it is uncertain how rates compare to those Veterans who were not enrolled.
- The reliance on self-report data may have introduced reporting biases; female Veterans may have under-reported incidences of combat-related events.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate the study and collect data from a larger, more heterogeneous sample
- Examine similar issues with male OIF/OEF Veterans
- Explore other variables, such as gender roles, gender identity, instances of sexual harassment or assault, and military sexual trauma

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