Attitudes, Experiences, and Considerations for Retention and Attrition Among American Active Duty Deployed Navy Women

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Abstract

At the time of this article, the number of women serving in the US military has continued to grow, including in occupational specialties previously not open to them. Therefore, research is needed to understand the continued effects of this expansion, along with continued gender integration, on women's experiences and retention decisions in the military. In this pilot initiative, we conducted discussion groups with 78 actively deployed women from the US Navy and US Marine Corps to identify factors influencing their decisions to remain in, or separate from, active-duty service. We also examined the role that comprehensive women's health services may play in addressing servicewomen's concerns regarding military service. Findings indicate that pride in military service and job benefits are among the primary reasons for retention, and negative gender-based experiences are among the primary motivators for separation. Women's health services that address challenges associated with family life and work balance, as well as gender bias and discrimination, were identified as desired resources.

Keywords: military, female, gender, deployment, experiences, retention, mental health

Introduction

Women have served in critical roles supporting all US war efforts. However, their capacity to serve was restricted until 1948, when the Women's Armed Service Integration Act was passed, allowing women to serve in permanent roles in the US Armed Forces,[1] and again in 2013, when the Department of Defense (DoD) opened all military occupations to women.[2] By 2016, women accounted for 16% of active-duty enlisted personnel and 18% of active-duty officers across all military branches, and these numbers have continued to increase.[3,4] As women have continued to account for a greater proportion of the US military, research is needed to focus on the complex landscape in which servicewomen decide whether to remain in uniform or leave active-duty service. This includes understanding the sex- and gender-specific needs and challenges servicewomen face that may affect their retention in the military.[1]

Evidence shows that mental, physical and military service needs may differ as a function of gender. These stressors have been associated with lower retention rates of female service members, who report lacking the psychological support they need to navigate these stressors[5] and for whom social support may have a stronger impact on psychological and physical health.[6]

As women continue to deploy and serve in more diverse occupational specialties, distinct social, environmental, and occupational factors may create unknown and unique health risks with the potential to exacerbate existing health disparities in rates of depressive disorders,[7,8] posttraumatic stress disorder and numerous other conditions.[9-11] This impact may be further magnified by experiences of stigma or behaviours that are, or are perceived as, marginalising, as known barriers to help-seeking behaviours that could prevent or limit illness.[12] The pilot effort detailed here was undertaken to explore the views and opinions of a sample of military women,

1 Data summarized in 2023 noted that females had graduated Army Ranger School (2015), and the first female Marine led an infantry platoon (2018). By 2019, over 600 female Sailors and Marines were serving in combat arms units previously restricted to men, more than 650 women held Army combat roles and over 1000 had accessed Army combat specialties (Panetta, L and Stoneman, Shelly, The Hill, 1/28/2023).

specifically regarding their mental health needs, and to gain insight into their reasons for remaining in or separating from active-duty service.

Materials and methods

Participants

Participants were 78 active-duty Navy and Marine Corps servicewomen stationed aboard a US Navy-deployed vessel from 26 October, 2016 to 16 April, 2017. Participants ranged in rank from enlisted to officer (E-1 to O-4), with 76% (n = 60) enlisted. Ages ranged from early 20s to late 40s. Participants reported their ethnicity as White (47%), Filipino (20%), African American (17%), Hispanic (13%) and Asian (3%). Of those reporting marital status (n = 27), 59% indicated they were married. Thirty-three per cent (n = 26) of servicewomen reported having at least one child. Although not directly assessed, participants varied in their time in service. Those more senior in both the enlisted and officer ranks had numerous and varied prior service experiences before assignment to this specific platform.

Procedure

As part of the Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCSD) Women's Mental Health pilot initiative, female Navy and Marine Corps personnel were recruited from a deployed US Navy vessel through shipboard dissemination of information about discussion group opportunities. The NMCSD Institutional Review Board approved the work as part of a quality improvement process to explore the perspectives of deployed women through informal conversations with a uniformed psychiatrist and officer. The ship's commander also approved it. Participation was voluntary; formal signed consent was neither required nor collected, and no compensation was provided to participants.

A female active-duty medical officer (O-4 rank) conducted individual interviews and focus group discussions with servicewomen who volunteered to participate. To foster free discussion, focus groups were stratified by rank (officers [O-2 to O-4], Chiefs [E-7 to E-9], and enlisted [E-1 to E-6]). Emails were sent to additional potential participants to solicit their input. Questions used in interviews, focus group discussions and email inquiries are listed in Table 1. Using a discovery-oriented constructivist approach, minor alterations to the questions were made, depending on participants' responses.

The primary investigator compiled field notes for each interview and focus group discussion, which served as the basis for later analyses. Prior to analysing responses, identifying information was deleted to protect confidentiality. The research team reviewed and analysed the field notes, using phenomenological analysis to cluster statements into themes and subthemes. In the case of discordant determinations about a particular construct, an independent research staff member served as a tiebreaker reviewer. Overarching themes identified from the primary questions about remaining on active duty and separating from service were dichotomised into positive and negative valences.

Results

The results indicated three distinct areas of responses: reasons and motivations for remaining on active duty, reasons and motivations for ending active service, and women's mental health topics.

Reasons and motivations for remaining on active duty

Participants described several motivations for remaining on active duty. The main themes endorsed were 1) personal growth (encompassing the subtheme of pride) and 2) standard military benefits (encompassing the two subthemes of available healthcare benefits and financial stability) (Table 2).

Table 1. Questions asked of participants

What drives you to (a) remain on active duty or (b) consider EASing?
What would assist you in remaining on active duty longer?
What women's mental health resources, if any, would assist you in remaining on active duty longer?
Have you ever heard of women's mental health as a specialty within psychiatry/psychology?
What topics do you think are important to women's mental health?

EAS, exit from active service.

Source/Notes: Authors' analysis of focus group data 2016–2017.

Table 2. Results: themes and subthemes

Question	Themes	Subtheme
What drives you to remain on active duty?	Personal growth	Pride
	Standard military benefits	Available healthcare benefits
		Financial stability
What drives you to consider EASing?	Gender bias and discrimination	
	Deployment and separation	
	Family life and work balance	
What topics do you think are important to women's mental health?	Experiences of servicewomen with families	
	Gender bias and discrimination	
What women's mental health resources, if any, would assist you in remaining on active duty longer?	Help with working in a primarily male environment	
	Balancing personal and professional life	
	Deployment resources and programs for women with families	

EAS, exit from active service.

Source/Notes: Authors' analysis of focus group data 2016–2017.

Personal growth. The theme of personal growth contained the most endorsed subtheme. Pride, along with other less unified comments, was related to personal growth. Pride captured servicewomen's sense of achievements and personal accomplishments while serving. One E-5 servicewoman described this theme: 'The Navy has taught me that I am tougher and smarter than I thought I was.' An officer expressed similar sentiments and described a sense of pride in doing 'something girls don't do'. Several Chiefs reported a deep sense of pride in playing a part in history and 'being part of the change'. Several participants were part of the first crews that allowed women to serve aboard ships. Overall, many women described their identity as a service member as a source of pride that enables them to gain personal growth.

Standard military benefits. Standard military benefits contained two of the most highly endorsed reasons to remain on active duty: available healthcare benefits and financial stability. Available healthcare benefits covered themes related to the importance women placed on receiving personal and family medical and healthcare benefits through the military. One E-5 servicewoman mentioned the importance of being able to provide medical insurance for her family. This coverage was also considered a top benefit and an important reason to remain on active duty. Participants expressed satisfaction with the selection, availability and accessibility of coverage for fertility services, pre- and postnatal care, educational classes for parents and care for children with special needs. Regarding perinatal and postnatal care, servicewomen reported having positive healthcare experiences.[2] Regarding financial stability, some servicewomen mentioned that their dependable income incentivised them to remain on active duty.

Reasons and motivations for ending active service

Participants described several motivations for ending active military service. The three most highly endorsed reasons were 1) gender bias and discrimination, 2) deployment and separation from family, and 3) family life and work balance.

Gender bias and discrimination. Gender bias and discrimination were the most endorsed themes for separation. This encapsulates participants' struggles with feeling, per direct report, 'targeted' by peers, leadership and military policies. Some women mentioned they felt as though they were working within an 'old boys' club' (specifically reported) and had to work harder than their male counterparts. This issue was prevalent among senior enlisted personnel. When some female Chiefs (E-7 and above) reported that they are reminded by male peers that 'they don't belong', all in this rank group agreed with the statement. It was also noted that a continued lack of women in leadership felt isolating, and biased

2 Of note, since this effort was completed, maternity leave policies have advanced across the services, and parental leave has since been added as a protected benefit for non-birth parents. It is not known how the establishment of leave for both parents may have subsequently impacted perceptions around gender-roles and stress around the care of a newborn.

perceptions of women in leadership positions were discussed. For example, in one focus group, one participant mentioned a female officer who was well-liked among female service members but was disliked by male colleagues. Several women also spoke of being the only female person in their departments or divisions. Relatedly, several women deemed liberty and dress code policies during port calls sexist. In the senior enlisted group, Chiefs shared instances during port calls when women's attire was inspected by male leadership, and some women were told to return to their spaces to dress in a subjectively more conservative manner, despite being in compliance with the dress code policy. These women felt the policy 'targeted' women directly.

Deployment and separation. Deployment and separation from family (i.e., significant others and children) for extended periods were frequently mentioned. One woman openly discussed her depression and attributed this to being away from her children. Other women described their difficulties with reunification after deployment, including that some of them experienced their children not recognising them when they returned home.

Family life and work balance. Participants reported challenges in balancing family life and military service. Most servicewomen who mentioned struggles with balancing family life and work felt they could not do both jobs well. For example, one woman who wanted to start having children said she felt she had to choose between the two.

Women's mental health topics

Responses to the question, 'What topics do you think are important to women's mental health?' were sparse and primarily related to experiences of servicewomen with families, including family separation, parenting while deployed and finding balance. One servicewoman stated that women with families have unique sources of stress not well understood by others. This was a central point in the broader conversation about servicewomen's mental health. The theme of gender bias and discrimination was the second-most discussed topic. This included managing interactions with 'male egos' in the workplace, differential treatment in male-dominated work centres and gender-based misunderstandings.

When servicewomen were asked about women's mental health resources that could promote retention, three topics emerged: 1) quality improvements in the work environment, particularly in terms of gender dynamics; 2) resources to assist them in balancing personal and professional life; and 3) deployment resources and programs for women with families. Several women proposed requiring Navy-wide gender-bias training to assist their male counterparts and those in leadership. Others requested support for servicewomen, including assistance with managing various gender-discrimination issues. Regarding work–life balance, one servicewoman requested a support group, and another sought reading resources. Several women specifically requested resources on parenting while deployed. Respondents felt that these resources would help prepare mothers and families for both deployment and reintegration.

Discussion

The first aim of this project was to explore the factors that influence servicewomen's decisions regarding their voluntary service. This sample of servicewomen provided an insightful look into the factors influencing their decisions. The primary reasons given for remaining on active duty were pride in serving, access to healthcare benefits and financial stability. In contrast, the primary reasons for leaving were related to gender isolation and bias, deployment and separation from family, and difficulties in balancing their military career with family responsibilities.

The second aim of this study was to identify issues that servicewomen perceived as important to their mental health and to assess the resources they believed would be helpful during their military career. In this context, as in the first aim, themes emerged about difficulties associated with being a mother/partner who is also an active-duty service member, a challenge that disproportionately affects women. Participants also raised the issue of gender bias and discrimination in a predominantly male environment. These two themes appeared across both sections of the interviews/discussions.

The complicated tangibles of remaining on active service

The military is conceived of as a meritocracy, and the tangible benefits associated with service are expected to be gender blind. In this sense, the military can be considered an experiment in which the civilian economic impacts of gender are, by design, eliminated. In the absence of direct gender differences in the financial benefits and resources available to service members, we should be able to objectively examine the impact of gender bias and stress on the outcomes of servicewomen. This would allow us to identify areas where this theoretically gender-blind framework fails to produce equal outcomes for military men and women.

Notably, a US military gender gap in retention and promotion persists, with male service members showing better outcomes than their female counterparts,[13] with resultant gender pay differences.[3] Still, when compared with civilian women, military women experience a much smaller gender pay gap, comparatively better maternity and family benefits, and more stable economics. In fact, this extends to their civilian lives as veterans, where they financially outperform their civilian female counterparts.[14] Not surprisingly, these tangible benefits emerged here as stated reasons for retention.

The intangibles of military service: pride and the gender stress gap

Interestingly, the positive intangibles mentioned in this study are shared by both men and women in the military. The social capital that comes with having served in the military includes a contemporary positive public perception and membership in a recognisable organisation. The concept of 'pride', the top intangible reason cited by this group for remaining on active service, is undoubtedly accessible to both genders. We found that pride in military service may be greater among servicewomen compared with servicemen. Specifically, these servicewomen reported finding pride in doing work that only a small portion of American women have elected to perform. Thus, in addition to the pride both genders take in serving their country, this group of women took pride in performing work that is often seen as atypical for women. The military draws heavily on this sense of pride and belonging as a recruiting and retention tool[15] and our findings suggest that women may be even more likely than men to perceive this as important when deciding to remain on active duty.

While the military provides stability for women that improves their economic status compared with civilian female counterparts, inequality in promotion and retention rates[17] forces consideration of the role that the intangibles of military service play in these women's occupational decisions. While these have improved over time, with some reports noting female officer promotions slightly exceed male promotion rates, some of the intangible distractors are reported to be so personally challenging that they may override the relative economic comfort that comes with military service, and contribute to female attrition, wherein women remain 28% more likely to leave the service than men.[16] We refer to this as the 'gender stress gap'. Additional intangible factors that detract from the appeal of military service are also important. Servicewomen are more likely than servicemen to be in dual-military families (20% vs 4%), and they are also more likely to be single parents (8% vs 3%).[3] For these reasons, and because of traditional assumptions that women are the primary caregivers, challenges related to family separations and maintaining work–life balance fall disproportionately on servicewomen. Studies of marriage, retention and sex/gender influences are plentiful. While the nuances fall outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that marital status and sex are intersecting variables that also overlap with service. For example, one post-9/11 US Reserve and National Guard sample showed military attrition was associated with being unmarried (vs married).[17] However, for active-duty populations, a recent RAND review noted marginally higher 36-month attrition rates for married service members, which vary both by time in service and military branch.[18] These factors can be seen as contributing to the gender stress gap in the military, potentially affecting women's decisions to remain on active duty.

However, the most significant factor contributing to the gender stress gap and undermining military retention among this group of servicewomen was gender bias and discrimination. While no participants volunteered experiences of sexual harassment or assault during interviews or focus groups, many of them described being the target of sexist behaviour by their male counterparts. The stressors of gender bias and gender isolation are not theoretical. There are known tangible outcomes of these stressors related to performance in both the military[19] and civilian sectors, where a 'sense of belonging' was described as the mediator between workplace sexism and both mental health and job satisfaction.[20] While the results from this small qualitative study cannot be extrapolated to the larger military population, our findings suggest that gender stress and discrimination may be potent influences on individual women's decisions to continue or leave active-duty service.

Strengths and limitations

Among the study's notable strengths, this qualitative effort had a relatively large sample, from which clear patterns emerged regarding the themes that influence servicewomen's intentions to leave or remain on active duty. In addition, the sample was demographically diverse, including enlisted ranks and officers. Lastly, this study provided primary source data on factors that impact servicewomen's intentions to leave or remain on active duty, thereby informing programs and resources that uniquely assist them.

Several limitations to this pilot initiative should be noted. First, data were derived from a variety of

sources, including individual interviews, discussion groups and emailed responses. A second limitation is that themes were extracted from the facilitator's field notes rather than audio transcripts, potentially leading to team misinterpretation during the analysis phase and precluding a more powerful systematic analysis at the individual participant level. A consideration is that the interviewer/discussion group leader was a female officer. While the responses appeared candid, deference to rank and socially desirable responses must always be considered a potential limitation in military research. The data were collected from servicewomen deployed on a single ship; thus, the themes we identified may not be representative of the issues affecting servicewomen in other duty assignments or across different services. Although the numbers were robust for the discussion groups, they do not allow for analysis by rank or ethnicity, and they are solely from women, without a comparison to male servicemembers, who may have both similar and different considerations in their decisions to remain on active duty or leave. Lastly, these data were collected before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and opinions and perspectives on labour have been greatly influenced since then.

Conclusion

Although this pilot initiative provides important insights into servicewomen's potential for continued active-duty service, additional research is needed to establish the generalizability of these findings across both individual difference factors (e.g., rank, years of service, marital and dual-military status, race/ethnicity, having children) and factors related to one's environment or situation (e.g., unit location, sex of unit leaders, egalitarian beliefs and biases of leadership, gender proportions within unit, branch of service, military occupational specialty), as well as other demographic and service-specific factors. Future research should use objective measures to identify both individual and environmental factors that affect women's experiences in the military and how those experiences can translate into feelings of gender isolation and mental health symptoms. If national and military leadership does find an assessed value in having a military force that reflects the sex-based population of the US, as well as the nations in which the US military deploys, it would then also be important to investigate specific improvements that can be made to reduce women's experiences of ostracism, bias and unequal treatment within the workplace. Ultimately, it would be important to develop, implement, and evaluate programs or resources to improve retention of women on active duty by targeting women's unique experiences. Incorporating recommendations from the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), established in 1951, may also continue to improve specific military recruitment and retention efforts.

Many workplaces, including the military, lean heavily on tangible benefits to incentivise employees and members to remain. This effort has demonstrated that the nearly unmatched economic benefits and stability that narrow the global gender pay gap are not sufficient to ensure equal outcomes for servicewomen and servicemen. Instead, servicewomen's retention and health are adversely impacted by the more intangible and nebulous gender stress gap. The gender stress gap in the military must be addressed as it adversely affects not only servicewomen's health but also their retention, thereby adversely affecting the readiness of the US Armed Forces.

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