

Military Women and Marriage: A Fact Sheet

Background

Similar to many civilian professions, the number of women in the United States Armed Services has increased substantially over the past 30 years.^{1,2} However, the Armed Services continue to be a male-dominated environment. Approximately 14.3% of the active duty component and 17.8% of all service members are female. At most recent count, there are 203,375 active duty,³ and 150,779 reserve female service members.⁴ Female service members are not distributed equally across the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force. The Air Force has the highest percentage of active duty (19.6%) and Reserve (24.6%) female service members, while the Marines have the fewest active duty (6.2%) and reserve (5%) female service members. Although there are more enlisted female service members than officers (163,414 vs. 34,351), a larger percentage of officers are female than enlisted (15.3% vs. 14%).⁵

Some of the strengths often associated with the military lifestyle are stable income, housing, and health insurance. Another strength includes built-in support systems like a variety of free support groups. Military members are frequently self-reliant and resourceful; they have a keen appreciation for diversity and global communities and a commitment to a national mission (Rodriguez, 1984; cited in Hall, 2008).⁶ A service member's desire to return to his or her romantic partner and/or family is often the sustaining factor in his or her deployment. While the honor and benefits of service are formidable, military personnel face



circumstances that affect their ability to maintain happy and healthy marriages and families. Both male and female service members can find it challenging to balance marriage and military service.⁷ However, female service members have a lower marriage rate, a higher divorce rate, and are less likely to stay in the military than their male counterparts.^{8,9} This raises particular concerns about female service members and their marriages.

Historically, the military has treated men and women differently.^{10,11} For women, marriage, having children, or simply being female have been barriers to career advancement in the military. Between 1951 and 1976, women were discharged from the military if they became pregnant, adopted a child, or had a stepchild in their home.¹² Until 1967, women were limited to 2% of the military population. In 1997, approximately 90% of all

military occupations are open to women.^{13,14} The number of available occupations continues to increase, with female service members recently being assigned to serve on submarines for the first time. Although the official barriers for female service members have been decreasing, women in the military still face unofficial challenges and barriers related to serving in a traditionally male-dominated military.

The military places many demands on its male and female service members (e.g., lengthy deployments, mandatory moves). These demands can make it difficult to meet family needs. For example, the primary reason Navy Junior Officers report leaving the Navy is because their work and personal goals conflict.¹⁵ Traditionally, family life also places many demands on women, as they tend to perform the majority of housework and have primary responsibility for taking care of children.¹⁶ Balancing married life and a military career in a traditionally male-dominated environment poses challenges for female service members that male service members do not face.¹⁷ These challenges extend to the husbands of female service members (e.g., finding new employment after a move).^{18,19} However, husbands may receive less support from the military and less social support than the wives of male service members.²⁰ If military women struggle to balance competing military and family roles, they may be forced to choose between their marriage and their military career.

Definitions

Active Duty – When service members serve in the military as full-time employment, regardless of their branch of service, they are considered to be on active duty.²¹

National Guard – The Guard serves states as well as the federal government (called a dual-status organization).²² Each state has its own National Guard, under the control of the Governor, although the President can request the services of the Guard. Members of the Guard typically serve part-time, except when they are activated to full-time duty.

The Reserves – All branches of the Armed Forces include Reserves, with Reservists typically serving the military part-time while also maintaining civilian employment. When activated, Reservists will usually serve the military full-time, and then return to part-time service when deactivated.

Dual-military Couples – Dual-military couples are married couples with both spouses serving in the military.²³

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) – Sexual harassment that is threatening in nature or physical assault of a sexual nature that occurred while the victim was in the military.²⁴

Marriage Rates and Trends

Research on the effects of military life on the family lives of female service members is not readily available. When evaluating the marriages of female service members, practitioners should recognize that women in the military face more challenges than their male counterparts by trying to balance family life with an extremely demanding job. Both at work and at home, female service members challenge traditional gender roles.

Women in the military are less likely to be married than their male counterparts. However, the reason for this disparity is unclear. One possible explanation is that the military benefits for married service members were designed with male service

members in mind and may not be as supportive of married female service members. Conversely, female service members may choose to delay marriage, so that they can get ahead in their military careers. Female service members may view marriage and family life to be a deterrent to their military career aspirations.

- Male service members are more likely to be married than female service members (56.6% vs. 46.2%). This gender difference is particularly pronounced when looking at only active duty service members (88% of active duty males are married vs. 12% of active duty females).²⁵
- The Air Force has the highest rate of marriage (51.2%) for female service members among the four branches of the military. The Army follows the Air Force with a rate of 47%, the Marine Corps has a rate of 41.3% and the Navy has the lowest rate of marriage of 39.9% among female service members.²⁶
- 6.7% of all active duty service members are in dual-military marriages. Female service members have higher rates of dual-military marriages than male service members (22.4% vs. 4.1%). Of female service members who are married, 48.4% are in dual-military marriages.²⁷
- Some evidence suggests that service women with civilian husbands had unhappier marriages and a higher risk of marital separation than male service members with civilian spouses.²⁸

The military has recognized the importance of family life to service members, especially since difficulty in meeting family needs is a primary reason service members leave the military.^{29,30} Consequently, the military has invested substantial resources into providing services such as



healthcare, housing allowances, and services that support healthy marriages (e.g., counseling and marriage education), so that service members can maintain healthy families while meeting the demands of military life. It is unclear whether these resources meet the unique needs of the spouses of female service members.

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and Domestic Violence

Approximately 20% to 43% of female service members and veterans experienced military sexual trauma. Risk factors for women experiencing military sexual trauma include: entering the military at a young age; enlisted rank versus officer rank; and experiencing childhood physical or sexual assault. Female service members have been found to have higher rates of childhood sexual assault than their civilian counterparts.³¹ Women who experience MST are at higher risk for physical and mental health problems, such as post traumatic stress symptoms.^{32, 33,34}

Like other women, female service members may

be victims of domestic violence. In one study, 21.6% of active duty women experienced physical or sexual assault at the hands of their partners during their military service.³⁵ Domestic violence in military relationships is an area of concern among military professionals. The probability that active duty men and women in the Army will commit severe spousal aggression upon return from deployment increases as the length of the deployment increases.³⁶ Female Army service members are more likely to be violent with unemployed civilian spouses than employed civilian spouses.³⁷

Divorce Rates and Trends

A study of divorce trends in the military found that rates of divorce among female service members were twice those of male service members (7.7% vs. 3%). Speculations about the reasons for this disparity include: the military attracts females who are at a higher risk for divorce irrespective of their employment;³⁸ the difficulties that female service members and their families might encounter balancing military and family life; and a lack of availability of services specifically tailored for the spouses of female service members. There is no conclusive explanation for the substantial disparity in rates of divorce between men and women in the military. However, this study underscored concerns about the significant challenges that married female service members may face. For example, female service members are much more likely to be in dual-military couples, facing the additional challenges of balancing two military careers with family life.

Female service members and their spouses may seek services individually or as a couple to help achieve and maintain a healthy marriage.

It is important for service providers to educate themselves about the unique challenges that female service members face. Female service members are a minority in the military population,³⁹ and based on the disparity in divorce rates between them and their male counterparts,⁴⁰ it appears that the families of female service members face unique challenges. Service providers need to be aware of these challenges, due to their minority position in a traditionally male military environment. Furthermore, women's military experience may have included incidents of military sexual trauma which may have a negative impact on intimacy. Consequently, service providers need to be flexible, and recognize that their services may need to be tailored in ways that differ from civilian couples and from couples with military husbands in order to assist female service members and their partners.

The demands placed on military families may be heightened for women in the Armed Forces in some circumstances. When working with military couples in which both partners are service members or only the woman is a service member, it is necessary for policymakers and practitioners to consider the special issues that may arise. At this time, there is little to no research on the effects of home life for females in the military, suggesting a need for further research in the area.

Additional Resources

For military couples:

- [Military OneSource](#) (800-342-9647)
- Each branch of the military offers family support services:

[Army](#)

[Navy](#)

Air Force

Marine Corps

- [Military Mental Health](#)
- [American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy therapist locator](#)
- [Community Mental Health Clinics](#)
- [Military chaplains and local clergy](#)

For service providers:

- [Center for Deployment Psychology](#)
- [Give an Hour](#)
- [Contact your state's National Guard Family Program](#)
- [Become a Tricare provider](#)

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