

# **Hidden Veterans: A review of the literature on women veterans in contemporary society**

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## **Abstract**

Understanding the lived experience of women who serve or have served in the military, will enable a better understanding of their wishes and needs, in what is the largest growing group in militaries across the globe. This article aims to examine literature, which focusses on the lived experiences of women veteran's lives. Literature was analysed from two electronic databases, choosing research that focused on women veterans, to develop an understanding of their experiences in the military and veteran communities. We argue that current literature is dominated by the US experience and does not fully explore the global complexity of women veterans, or the difficulties military service causes them.

## **Key words**

Women, Military, Veterans, Experience, Gender

## **Background/Introduction**

Historically women veterans are underrepresented or missing in the literature, despite their roles being recognised and established for over 100 years (Newman, 2014). In most militaries women are in the minority; UK 10.3% (MOD, 2017a), USA 20%

(Reynolds and Shendruk, 2018), and 10.8% across NATO countries (NATO, 2015), although numbers are growing. The generally small numbers across the globe have potentially lead to a lack of emphasis on women in the veteran field of research.

While there is increasing recognition of a need for gender-specific military research in veteran populations (Feldman and Hanlon, 2012; Iverson, Seher, DiRamio, Jarvis, and Anderson, 2016), women veterans remain underrepresented. Just 2% of the literature mentions women veterans (Fig 1), whilst a much smaller proportion focusses on women as the primary source. There has been a large increase in women focussed research over the last ten years (Fig 1), as an the percentage of women veterans in our societies also increases, this in a climate with decreasing numbers in veterans, as militaries downsize (MOD, 2019; US Departmen of Veterans Affairs, 2016).

The number of women joining the military has increased over the last 20 years (NATO, 2015) , they are also the largest growing group in veteran communities (Koblinsky, Schroeder, and Leslie, 2017). The National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2017), state that 9.4% of US veterans are women, while the Royal British Legion (RBL) (2014) estimate 11.2% in the UK. If the trend continues over the coming years, we will potentially see an ever-increasing woman veteran population.

Most countries recognise that the principal growth in recruitment is women, which in part may be due to increase opportunities for women (NATO, 2015), consequently, they need to better understand women and their experiences of military service and members of the veteran community. Regrettably, much of the literature fails to ask women about their experiences and does not include women's narratives. Therefore,

this review focusses on literature that includes women's narratives, as revealed by their dialogue (Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou, 2013), to ensure their experiences are included in this review.

Most of the studies included in this review have been undertaken in the United States of America (USA), which limits the review to some degree with regards and international perspective. However, as the primary researcher has served in the UK Army and alongside US military personnel, they offer an insider perspective. Their personal experiences of military service will undoubtedly influence their interpretation of the literature (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017).

Most participants interviewed within this literature review, self-identify as a veteran (DiMauro, Renshaw, and Blais, 2018), possibly for accessing support or using veteran-specific services. This can affect the way women tell their stories, as the reason for telling the story and the people listening influence how it is recounted (Brintlinger, 2017). Therefore, this literature review does not represent all women veterans, particularly as they may not identify as a veteran or access services (Feldman and Hanlon, 2012; Rossiter and Smith, 2014).

Year	Women Veteran* <sup>1</sup> Number of search results	Veteran* <sup>2</sup> Number of search results
1970 - 1979	0	424
1980 - 1989	8	1024
1990 - 1999	44	5136
2000 - 2009	165	11679
2010 – 2018	642	22903
Total	859	41166

Fig 1 – Table showing Web of Science search “women veteran\*” and “veterans\*” May 2018

The term veteran is commonly, but not solely, used to describe a person who has served in the military. Additionally, veteran status differs by country. In the United Kingdom it is one days service (MOD, 2017b) whilst in the USA it is linked to active duty and method of discharge (Szymendera, 2016). There are many prefixes that are attached to enable the term ‘veteran’ to be more specific, such as World War II, combat or women. Whilst most veterans are likely to share a sense of identity, the prefix term will mean something specific to the user and contribute to how they identify as a veteran personally.

Although ‘veteran’ is a common term widely used in the literature, it is the subject of much debate amongst those who have served, and those providing veteran services.

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<sup>1</sup> May 2018 search – Women NEAR/2 veteran\*

<sup>2</sup> May 2018 search – Veteran\*

Burdett et al (2013), found that only 52% of UK ex-armed forces personnel identify as a veteran.. The UK has one of the most liberal definitions, making virtually all those who served eligible to use the term, and when required to access support. However, women would appear less inclined to identify as a veteran, with only 30.8% of women doing so (Burdett et al., 2013). However, it is important to acknowledge that only 2.6% of the total respondent group in this research were women. As it appears women are underrepresented in the veteran literature, we need to understand why, and the starting point is to review what we do know from the current literature.

To aid exploration of the literature and focus the search, a broad research question was developed to enable the capture of appropriate literature “What does the literature tell us about the experiences of women and are there gaps in the literature?”

## **Method**

A review of the literature was carried out in May 2018, using Arksey and O'Malley (2005) scoping review methodology. This method focused on a broader range of literature as an extension of the primary researchers PhD study. A scoping review enables the researcher to efficiently establish the main arguments within the literature being reviewed (Mays, Roberts, and Popay, 2001) and help to develop broad themes. The aim was not to address the quality of the research, but to seek to establish what the current knowledge is and what gaps there are in relation to this specific group (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005).

The study group “women/female military/veterans” was the most important consideration. A proximity search enabled the capture of a wider range of terms, such

as “women military veterans and women Army veterans”, returning an additional 13% of articles in the first sift.

Two electronic databases were chosen, Web of Science (WofS) and Scopus, both chosen for their breadth and reliability (Chadegani et al., 2013). Using both databases potentially increased the available literature by a third (Vieira and Gomes, 2009). WofS searches comprised of women NEAR/2 veteran\* and female NEAR/2 veteran\* and Scopus women PRE/2 veteran\* and female PRE/2 veteran\*. These generated a considerable range of literature across both databases.

Literature including narratives, that is, the inclusion of a dialogue of their experiences (Andrews et al., 2013), English language, peer-reviewed articles published between 2008 and 2018 where considered. Additionally policy and media sources have been included to support or challenge the literature. The rationale for including women-only articles was to ensure that the review captures the most relevant literature that focussed on women in the military and those in the veteran’s community. Ungendered or comparison studies potentially fail to include women’s narratives and can reinforce stereotypes due to disproportionately low numbers of women in the studies (Diekman and Eagly, 2000; Hannagan, 2017). Such literature can reflect assumption about the role women have within the military and veteran population (Kent and Kinsella, 2015; Mani, 2013).

### **What the literature says**

The literature has been broken down into three broad timelines: why women join, experiences during military service, and experiences after military service. This will

enable an understanding of the significant life events, which influence women who have served in the military, potentially identifying how their service experience influences their life after leaving.

### *Why women join the military*

The literature which explores why women join the military predominately focuses on establishing an understanding of subsequent behaviours, such as resilience in adversity (Brooke, Holliman, Monteith, Spitzer, and Brenner, 2018), transitioning from the military (Burkhart and Hogan, 2015; Demers, 2013) and homelessness (Hamilton, Poza, Hines, and Washington, 2012). Whilst these explore reasons for joining, this is usually in the context of the wider studies research aims and is limited in its ability to establish reasons that are not focussed on subsequent difficulties, for instance, establishing why someone joined, in the context of exploring their narratives of premature discharge (Dichter and True, 2015). Despite anticipating some difficulties, most women volunteered to join the military, believing they understood the commitment they are making, albeit not necessarily the extent and range of difficulties they may experience due to their gender.

Except for significant conflicts, such as the world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women predominantly join the military as a volunteer. They volunteer despite knowing that it is an employment dominated by men, which tends to give the power to men, arguably disempowering women (Gaines, 2017). While Gaines recognises the difficulties women can face, she also highlights that women who choose to work in such places are more

likely to be confident, self-motivated, strong and fearless, which enables them to feel that they can be successful in the environment (2017). These characteristics are often associated with those who join the military and help them meet the challenges of service life (Brooke et al., 2018; Gutierrez et al., 2013).

Burkhart and Hogan (2015) focus only on women's experiences, and establish a wide range of reasons for enlistment into the armed forces, such as: "To Seek Opportunities", "Pursuing Adventure" or "Seeking Safety" (p. 114). However, Dichter and True (2015) argue that limited employment opportunities and women feeling that they are likely to be treated better than in previous eras is a more likely reason to join. Women also have a longstanding desire to join from a young age and feel that joining the military is a calling, whereas others have strong patriotic reasons for joining (Mankowski, Tower, Brandt, and Mattocks, 2015). Family history and connections to the military is also a factor to consider when considering why women join the military (Dichter and True, 2015), as veterans and serving military personnel are often the best recruiters, advocating through their own experience of life in uniform.

Recruitment campaigns can also promote the benefits of enlistment, promising secure employment, accommodation, clear career pathways, promotion and healthcare (Mankowski et al., 2015). The military can also provide financial support to access further education and increase employment options post service (Hamilton, Washington, and Zuchowski, 2013; Iverson et al., 2016). Access to education is a big draw for some, who would not have the financial means to access higher education without this support (Mankowski et al., 2015)

Unfortunately, multiple studies argue that many women's reasons for joining and ambitions prior to service are not fulfilled in the reality of military life, and they leave without achieving their goals and ambitions, finding the military less of a haven but somewhere abuse starts or continues in their lives (Burkhart and Hogan, 2015; Cheney, Dunn, Booth, Frith, and Curran, 2013).

### *Experiences during the military*

Whilst many women have fulfilling and life-changing experiences within the military, and achieve significant personal and professional goals (Brooks, Dailey, Bair, and Shore, 2016; Dodds, 2016), others experience significant, physical and mental health difficulties, leading to early discharge which influences their lives long after military service has ended (Cheney et al., 2014; Dichter and True, 2015; Yalch, Hebenstreit, and Maguen, 2018). Women's experiences in recent military conflicts are often found in popular literature depicting significant events of heroism such as survival behind enemy lines (Johnson and Doyle, 2010). However, research into the woman's role in modern conflict tends to focus less on success and more on the search to problem solve a perceived set of difficulties experienced by this group.

In some ways, peer-reviewed literature contributes to a stereotype that women in the military inevitably have problems. However, Conard and Scott-Tilley (2015) explore the positive contributions that women make, such as helping to build better lives and how they impact on the progression of women's rights within countries that they serve. They also help develop an understanding of women and their exposure to combat in the

modern era (Conard and Scott-Tilley, 2015), at a time when popular narratives still portray women as non-combatant, implying that women are not exposed to the stresses of combat.

A Lack of understanding of the modern role of women in modern combat, can potentially reduce help-seeking in women veterans, as their experiences can be dismissed as less traumatic than their male counterparts (consider to always be combat personnel (Hamilton et al., 2012; Strong, Findley, McMahon, and Angell, 2015).

However, combat impacts on all who serve, as modern warfare is fluid with all areas of conflict a potential battlefield. Women also experience the impact of combat, losing friends in front of their eyes, witnessing death and injury and trying to protect those in danger (Burkhart and Hogan, 2015; Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev, 2017; Yalch et al., 2018). These experiences may be minimised by others, due to a lack of understanding about combat and combat exposure.

Current debates on the feasibility of women in combat roles rarely acknowledge the role women have and do play in combat, preferring to focus on the perceived problems with women as combatants and the perceived inevitable impact on standards that this will have (Ingham, 2018; Kemp, 2016).

Negative attitudes towards women in the military significantly affect their experiences. Labelling or making assumptions on an individual's operational capability is common in the military, which age old rivalries between the UK's Parachute Regiment and the Royal Marines. One group will always consider themselves to be more superior combatants to the other. On one hand this rivalry is very productive, as it drives military personnel to be their best, however, when such labelling is focused on women, it is generally much

less helpful. Labelling of women in the military has a tendency to focus on gender bias and stereotypes that women are weak and vulnerable, which ultimately limits their opportunities (Cheney et al., 2013; Crowley and Sandhoff, 2017). However, more recently armed Forces such as the British and US militaries have opened up all roles to women including service as an infantry soldier. In the British military, this has been achieved in part by role specific physical requirements that are gender neutral, offering a greater range of opportunities that are not based on gendered assumptions.

Gendered assumptions have led women to undertake gendered roles, dependent on environment, sometimes performing masculine roles, and condemning other women perceived to be too feminine, as a way of being accepted by men (Conard and Scott-Tilley, 2015; Crowley and Sandhoff, 2017). Whether male or female, being accepted in the military makes life easier. For women this means that they are more likely to be listened too and involved in military activity (Demers, 2013). While some women dampen down their femininity, as a way of being accepted in their role (Crowley and Sandhoff, 2017). Others harness their femininity to combat the impact of working in a male dominated environment (Iverson et al., 2016). These characteristics have been classified as “blending” or trying to combine femininity alongside more masculine characteristics, to enable acceptance in male-dominated environments (Herbert, 1998). Acceptance however, is not something that comes without proving you are as good as or better than men (Gutierrez et al., 2013), and you’re tough enough to take it (Iverson et al., 2016).

When women do play to this role and are tough, labels such as “bitch” are levelled at them (Brooks et al., 2016). Alternatively, if they are not tough enough they are weak,

either way someone will pull them down. Invariably, women are better tolerated when they are in the role of caregiver, as opposed to warfighters (Brintlinger, 2017).

Such attitudes as those described above can lead to abuse and discrimination.

Literature from the US exploring the impact of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) has exposed the effect of this on women. The true extent to which MST impacts on women veterans may never be known, however, what is known is that even in our most recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, over 40% of women who took part in research studies reported that they were subjected to sexual trauma at the hands of those they work alongside (Katz, Huffman, and Cojucar, 2017).

The US Department of State (2017) has explored the impact of MST over the last decade, and while this does not only affect women, women are the most likely to be targeted. Most literature on MST is from the US, with limited literature from the wider international community. However, it is argued that it should be considered, if not at least explored, as a global issue for the world's military. There is evidence that the wider NATO community is exploring the impact that sexual violence has on the military (Godier, Fossey, and Caddick, 2017), and indications are that MST is problematic within other NATO armed forces. Research exploring the broader implications for those who have been exposed to MST indicates that there will be a legacy of long-term physical and mental health difficulties as a consequence (Decker, Rosenheck, Tsai, Hoff, and Harpaz-Rotem, 2013; Dichter and True, 2015; Kelly et al., 2008). Evidence is already suggesting that women exposed to MST are more likely to experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Burkhart and Hogan, 2015), depression (Hiraoka, Cook, Bivona, Meyer, and Morissette, 2016), suicidal thoughts (Gutierrez et al., 2013) and

eating disorders (Breland, Donalson, Nevedal, Dinh, and Maguen, 2017). This is an alarming indication of the overall impact of MST, but only exposes the impact for those who seek help within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) care system (Wolff and Mills, 2016). This does not take into account those that feel unable to seek help, or those that go to charitable organisations for help.

How MST is reported and the treatment of those who report MST is an area of concern. In particular, there is a perception that investigations carried out by the military are far from proficient and women service personnel fear reprisals for reporting incidents (Wolff and Mills, 2016). It is argued that both of these factors contribute to a potential underreporting of incidents. The study by Wolff and Mills (2016) specifically focused on the reporting of MST from WWII onwards. They found that MST had affected 90% of women participants in that study, yet only 15% had reported it. Fear, inability to provide evidence of assault and the cohesive behaviour of perpetrators and command structures all delay or prevent reporting (Cloitre, Jackson, and Schmidt, 2016; Gibson, Gray, Katon, Simpson, and Lehavot, 2016; Wolff and Mills, 2016),.

Wolff and Mills (2016) argue that MST is not a new phenomenon, indicating that women across all eras had been affected by gender discrimination, sexual assault and violence whilst serving. This would appear to happen, despite the military being viewed as value driven, self-disciplined and a place in which people work as a team (Dichter, Wagner, and True, 2018, p. 847).

Although most current literature discusses the recent experiences of women in the military, this has not always been noteworthy enough for academic research.

Regardless of this, some work is currently underway to take another look at the hidden

histories of women and combat, by researching archives and interviewing survivors. Brintlinger, (2017) suggests that despite women veterans of WWII telling stories of war, the dominant narrative was based upon the man's viewpoint. It is perhaps only recent the history of recent conflicts that has enabled women to tell their own stories. For example, few know that an estimated 800,000 women died on the Russian front, many fighting alongside men (Brintlinger, 2017), whilst current debates continue to question women's suitability for the front line or role in close ground combat (Kemp, 2016). If women had been recognised for the significant role they have played during previous wars (Rappaport, 2013; Newman, 2014) and authors had sought more accurate accounts of the experiences of women during these times (Brintlinger, 2017), then perhaps current debates would seem less politically motivated and be more favourable on women's roles within the military.

As previously mentioned some roles within the military appear more acceptable for women and usually attract a higher proportion of female recruits. Women in medical, nursing or caring roles are generally accepted as they conform to the stereotypical role of women and war (Brintlinger, 2017; Twelbeck, 2015). Burkhart and Hogan (2015) observed that women in roles such as these appeared to experience the same trauma and combat exposure as that of their male colleagues, but less abuse than those women serving in historically male roles. The extent and prevalence of abuse also appeared to differ between services, i.e. Navy, Army Air Force. This may be due to the increasingly larger numbers of women found in the medical services and the balance between genders being more favourable to women. However, when compared with the wider military, medical services are quite a small component of the wider armed

forces, and most women still serve in areas dominated by men, where gender bias is more prevalent (Iverson et al., 2016).

The role that military uniform exacerbates gender roles and identity in the military also has to be considered. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century military uniforms were gender specific, however, more recently uniforms have become gender neutral that has helped to blur the role gender plays in specific military roles. However, this can be a double-edged sword as it is not always easy for outsiders to identify who the women are within the military. Uniform that retains a gendered theme, such as maternity wear, intensify their otherness, as some women try to blend in choosing larger sizes over impractical maternity wear.

Despite past generations of women being discharged when pregnant, pregnant women and mothers are permitted to service on, with parental support (Dichter and True, 2015). While this demonstrates a firm commitment to the military, others argue its impacts on unit cohesion (Kemp, 2017).

As primary caregivers, women balance family and military life, despite increased stress (Katto, 2014; Lundberg, Taniguchi, McGovern, and Smith, 2016). Military commands are unable or unwilling to make concessions for mothers, as deployment overseas and prolonged absence, impact on both mothers and children (Dichter and True, 2015; Leslie and Koblinsky, 2017), contributing to premature discharge and women placing the needs of their family over the military and looking for new opportunities outside the military.

### *Experiences after the military*

Understanding why women leave the military is not fully understood, however, what we do know is that many women leave earlier than planned (Dichter and True, 2015).

Feelings of being unprepared to re-establish their lives and lacking skills that enable a healthy and fulfilling transition (Breland, Donalson, Dinh, Nevedal, and Maguen, 2016).

Re-establishing life outside the military is not always easy, missing a feeling of belonging, such as talking to people who understand what it is like to have lived and served in military environments (Koblinsky et al., 2017). Access to employment or education; can be particularly problematic for veterans. A report by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation (USCCF) (2016), suggests that many veterans have only worked in the military and lack experience, despite desirable traits such as a strong work ethic. Furthermore, reports by the USCCF (2016) and the RBL (2014), claim women veterans have additional difficulties finding employment. Although neither report offers a cause, others suggest premature discharge, physical and MH difficulties, parental responsibilities or lack of confidence due to workplace abuse impact on this (Dichter and True, 2015; Mankowski et al., 2015).

Seeking employment or entering further education enables women to develop self-belief, after experiencing gender bias and abuse within the military (Brooks et al., 2016; Crowley and Sandhoff, 2017).

Education is associated with increased employment opportunities, and the military promotes education both during and post service. For some, accessing supported educational programmes for veterans helps gain qualifications and skills for future work

(Iverson et al., 2016). To help veterans adjust and succeed campuses need to provide better health support, particularly women veterans, who may have been exposed to MST and have additional health needs (Iverson et al., 2016).

With the VHA provision of free healthcare to eligible veterans, a significant amount of health-related research on women veterans is from the US, the largest growing group within VHA (Rossiter and Smith, 2014); helping to increase the research agenda for women. While countries such as the UK provide health care through their National Health Services, providing robust gendered healthcare for all, based on health needs. Consequently, priorities for women veteran research is less developed outside of the US. No UK focussed articles meet inclusion criteria for this review.

The recent increase in research of women veterans (see Fig 1), might have resulted from US congressional interest, and the review by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), on the needs of women veterans. Despite over 281,000 women accessing treatment in VA facilities none of the facilities met policies on provisions for women (US GAO, 2010). Hence, the increase in research, which is helping to define needs, target services and understand why women veterans fail to access support.

The US Department of Veterans Affairs (2015) explored barriers to accessing VA support, and their findings indicate that a significant number of women veterans do not understand eligibility status and information about eligibility is most likely targeting those receiving support. Brooks et al., (2016) suggest confusion on eligibility led to failings in provision and increased risk of the long-term needs of women.

VHA needs to consider gender-specific healthcare, as women's experiences and health needs are different to men's (Brooks et al., 2016). For instance, Koblinsky et al., (2017), found that homelessness and suicide among women veterans, is at a far greater rate than civilians and Hoffmire, Kemp, and Bossarte (2015) suggest a 40% increase in suicide over ten-years. All contributing to the growing understanding that exposure to war, trauma and MST increases the risk of PTSD (Magruder et al., 2015; Ryan, McGrath, Creech, and Borsari, 2015) and is likely attributable to the physical and mental health needs of women veterans now and in the future.

As women veterans are at higher risk of both PTSD and MST, this increases their risk of eating disorder (Forman-Hoffman, Mengeling, Booth, Torner, and Sadler, 2012), harmful substance use (Katz et al., 2017) and chronic pain (Tan et al., 2013). As research continues to explore their health needs, and contributes to the understanding of women veterans, it also reveals a potential ticking time bomb, in which healthcare providers may be unable to meet their needs within current facilities and budgets.

### **Limitations**

Limitations to this article include that it does not consider any male perspectives, and looks at literature solely focused on women veterans and their experiences. No additional academic literature was included after the initial data search in May 2018. A significant part of the available literature is from the US; therefore this review may not represent international perspectives.

### **Conclusions**

Further research and discussion is required in this area, with less than 2% of the current literature including women veterans. An emphasis on research into the reasons women join, remain and leave the military would increase the current understanding of their experiences, choices, aspirations, successes and difficulties.

The US is leading on the range and depth of research into women in the military and veterans, while countries with women in their military also need to develop their own research. Reliance on the experiences of US women may fail to target valuable resources within each country. Although some experiences will be the same or similar as that of the US, it is not enough to evidence each country's needs. Meanwhile, in the absence of global literature, the US findings should at least be explored by the world's militaries.

Future research should also exploring a greater range of experiences, as most literature focusses on the health, mental health needs and problematic experiences of women in and beyond the military. Failure to explore a wider range of experiences women veterans have may miss the positive contribution women make to the military, which adds to the stereotypes and subsequent narratives constructed about women and military service.

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