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Melissa E. Dichter¹ and Gala True^{1,2}

Abstract

Women who serve in the military benefit from unique opportunities but face strains as a minority population and, compared to men, report greater dissatisfaction with their service and have shorter military careers. We interviewed 35 U.S. women veterans about their decisions to enter and leave military service. Premature separation—leaving military service before one plans, expects, or wants to—was a prominent theme and was often precipitated by gender-based experiences, including interpersonal violence, harassment, and caregiving needs. Findings can inform efforts to improve the length and quality of women’s military careers and support women during and after service.

Keywords

gender-based violence, pregnancy/parenthood, qualitative, women veterans

Introduction

The number of women in the U.S. military has increased sevenfold in the last four decades; women currently comprise 14% of active duty forces and 20% of new military recruits. Compared with men, however, women tend to have shorter military service periods and report less satisfaction with their time in the service (D’Amico & Lee, 1999; Nuciari, 2006). Studies have documented the negative financial impacts of high turnover among military personnel, highlighting the importance of addressing early attrition among women service members from an organizational perspective (Kelley et al., 2001; Lancaster et al., 2013). Moreover, in order to ensure equal employment opportunities and protect the rights and interests of women who choose to enlist, it is important to understand the factors that contribute to women’s dissatisfaction with, and separation from, military service.

¹ Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion, Philadelphia VA Medical Center, Philadelphia, PA, USA

² University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Melissa E. Dichter, Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion, Philadelphia VA Medical Center, 3900 Woodland Avenue, Building 4100 (Annex), Philadelphia PA 19104, USA.

Email: mdichter@sp2.upenn.edu

Studies conducted since the Vietnam War era have identified common motivations for joining an all-volunteer military, including opportunities for self-improvement, funding for education, service (patriotism), travel, escaping adverse home/social circumstances, and acquiring job/skills training (Bachman, 1983; Griffith & Perry, 1993; Patten & Parker, 2011; Pliske, Elig, & Johnson, 1986; Sadler, Booth, Nielson, & Doebbeling, 2000; D. Segal, Bachman, Freedman-Doan, & O'Malley, 1999; Woodruff, Kelty, & Segal, 2006). However, the extant literature on why persons join the military has relied on predominantly male samples; even in cases in which data on women exist, insufficient numbers of women for statistical power has led to exclusion of women from quantitative studies (Kleykamp, 2006). This has hampered the ability of researchers to get a clear picture of how women view military life and why they join.

The U.S. military has not historically been welcoming to women (Shields, 1988; Simon, 2001). Women continue to face high rates of sexual assault and harassment, which is a leading contributor to women's separation from military service (Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010; Sims, Drasgow, & Fitzgerald, 2005; Suris & Lind, 2008). Women also face disparities in not being promoted at the same rates as men (Asch, Miller, & Malchiodi, 2012; Baldwin, 1996; Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010), and past exclusions of women from certain military positions creates a "brass ceiling," whereby women's opportunities for advancement are limited relative to their male peers. Additionally, the demands of motherhood and other caregiving roles that disproportionately affect women can be incompatible with traditional career trajectories both within and outside military life and can be a factor in women deciding to end their military service (Kelley et al., 2001; Kelty et al., 2010; Shields, 1988). As a significant minority in the military, women have fewer opportunities than men for same-gender mentorship, role-modeling, and camaraderie (Kelty et al., 2010). These circumstances may work together to create an environment that discourages women from serving for longer periods of time.

Trends in military recruitment and retention vary based on a variety of military, economic, and societal factors that make military service more or less attractive (for a discussion, see Kapp, 2013). Segal (1995) proposed a theory of women's participation in military service as determined by an interplay between three sets of factors: (a) military needs, structure, policies, and resources; (b) social structure, including demographic patterns, family structure, and labor force and economic patterns; and (c) culture, including social constructions of, values about, and discourse on gender, family, and equality. According to this theory, women's participation in the armed forces will expand and contract based primarily on the military's demand for personnel. Military demands may override cultural norms regarding gender roles in times of extended conflict. Economic factors, including limited nonmilitary employment opportunities, paired with more egalitarian cultural perspectives, may also encourage women's military service. This theory attempts to explain and predict population-based female military service trends; it does not account for the nuances among individual women's decisions regarding joining, and continuing with, military service. More research is needed to understand women's decisions around entering and leaving military service; in particular, individual distinctions that may become apparent through qualitative inquiry.

Our work contributes to the literature by describing themes present in narrative accounts of women veterans, with a focus on the circumstances surrounding their entry into military service, life experiences while in the military, and circumstances leading to their separation from service. We use a person-centered approach, allowing the themes to originate from women's own voices and situated within women's lives. Based on our findings, we propose potential points of intervention to support women both during and after military service.

Method

Data for this study were drawn from one-on-one, semistructured interviews with a nonrepresentative sample of 35 women veterans receiving care at the Philadelphia Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical

Center (PVAMC). Participants were recruited via flyers and announcements in the women's health, post-deployment, and mental health clinics. All interviews were conducted by one of the investigators (or a trained and supervised member of their research teams) in a private space within PVAMC at a time convenient to the participant. Participants signed informed consent forms to participate in the study and received cash compensation for their time and effort. Study procedures were reviewed and approved by the PVAMC institutional review board.

Interviews were intended to generate knowledge to identify gaps in social and health care services for veterans and inform interventions to address these gaps. Interviewers used a semistructured interview guide consisting of nondirective, open-ended questions to elicit veterans' narratives about their experiences moving into and out of military service, including their life circumstances prior to entering the service, reasons for separating from military service, and needs following separation from military service. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim; transcripts were imported into qualitative data analysis software to aid in management and coding of the data. All names used in the text are pseudonyms.

We developed and defined an initial set of codes after a close reading of five transcripts (open coding) by both of the authors. We then further revised and refined codes through discussion with research team members and developed a final codebook of the codes and their definitions. In addition, we created summaries of each interviewee's narrative of military service, including reasons for entering the military, experiences during service, number of years of service, and reasons for separating from military service. This outline of each woman's personal narrative served as a window into individual trajectories of military service. These narrative summaries allowed us to identify patterns across women's experiences, as well as "outliers," or individuals whose stories were dissimilar to the majority of our sample in important ways.

Once the final coding scheme and rules for coding had been established, the remaining transcripts were coded by two trained research assistants supervised by one of the authors who reviewed each coded interview to identify instances of discrepancies in the applications of codes to text. Few discrepancies occurred; these were reviewed and resolved through discussion with the entire research team. Once all data had been coded, the authors met to identify recurrent themes related to women's reasons for entering and exiting military service.

Participants

The 35 female veteran participants ranged in age from 22 to 58 years, with a mean of 42.4; of the participants, 21 (60%) were between the ages of 40 and 58, with the remainder under 40 years. Twenty (57%) of the participants identified as black or African American, 2 (6%) identified as white or Caucasian, 2 (6%) identified as Hispanic/Latina, and the remaining 11 (31%) identified as mixed race. The majority (20; 57%) of participants had served in the Army; 8 (23%) served in the Navy; 5 (14%) in the Marine Corps; and 2 (6%) in the Air Force. Length of service ranged from less than 1 year to 23 years, with a mean of 9 years. Two participants had served during the Vietnam era, 16 (45.7%) served during Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF), and the remaining 17 served in between these conflict eras.

Findings

In general, participants reported satisfaction with the structure of military life, the skills learned during their period of service, and the sense of having a purpose or mission in life that came with serving. Yet all but three of the participants in our study reported separating from military service earlier than they had planned or wished to do so; a phenomenon we term "premature separation." Subsequently, we present descriptions and explanations of (a) women's reasons for entering military

service, (b) life events and circumstances that contributed to premature separation from military service, and (c) outlier cases of those who experienced circumstances that posed a challenge to continuing military service but did not lead to premature separation.

Reasons for Entry Into Military Service

The women in our study described four common and often overlapping reasons for choosing to enter military service: (a) having an orientation toward military service, often from an early age; (b) seeking opportunities for travel, adventure, and new experiences; (c) seeking increased access to education, employment, or other resources for economic support; and (d) escaping from aversive life circumstances.

Tabatha, a 57-year-old African American woman who served in the Army during the Vietnam War era, typified someone who had a clear orientation toward service. Growing up, Tabatha had been a Brownie, a cadet, and a Girl Scout; she saw the military as the next step on that path and hoped to have a long military career. Evelyn, a 40-year-old white woman, served in the Army for 20 years and had a history of military service among her male relatives; Evelyn enlisted prior to Desert Storm out of a desire to continue the family tradition and serve her country. Sharon, a 28-year-old African American woman who served in the Army, presented an example of someone who joined the military seeking travel and adventure:

I was kind of bored and I was thinking maybe I could travel, go to different places . . . go somewhere different, see new people . . . because I didn't have anything going for me at the time at home.

Joining in search of economic and employment security and advancement was another common theme among our participants. For some, military service seemed to be the only or best option for advanced education and training; for example, Grace, a white woman who served in the Navy during the OEF/OIF era, explained:

My family didn't have any money to send me to college—I was one of seven kids. I wanted something more for my life . . . And the military seemed like the best path to do that.

Anne is an African American woman who served in the Marine Corps during peacetime; her experience demonstrates how military service provided access to opportunities and a way out of a difficult homelife at the same time:

I joined because I wanted to go to school. I was 18, was just kicked out of the house. I had just graduated high school and . . . I didn't know what to do. I just knew I wanted to go to college. I saw a Marine Corps commercial, and I was like, OK, this is my chance to get into college.

A number of single mothers in our sample joined as a means to provide for their children. Rachel, an African American woman, enlisted in the Air Force during the OEF/OIF period in order to financially provide for her young daughter:

Well, I had my daughter and she was really little. Her father was not going to be any help in raising her, or supporting her, and my family background was pretty messed up so I didn't have a lot of support from that corner. I really wanted something better for her, to give her a better life than I had, and joining the military seemed like the best option.

Finally, Heidi, a white woman who enlisted in the Marine Corps, enlisted out of a belief that military service would help her maintain sobriety and “get my life together.” She said, “I figured I needed structure and [you] can't get more structure than the Marines.”

Life Events and Circumstances That Contributed to Premature Separation

Events and circumstances that contributed to premature separation fell in to two broad categories as follows: (a) circumstances extraneous to military service that were incompatible with the demands or requirements of military service; and (b) negative and traumatic events experienced during military service. Events and circumstances extraneous to military service included mental or behavioral health problems that predated or developed independently of service, conflicts between caregiving responsibilities and demands of service, and emergence of other life stressors during time of service, such as interpersonal violence. One example came from Dorothy, an African American woman who enlisted in the Army during the post-Vietnam war era to “make a difference” and further her education. She ended up serving less than one year, however, when she learned she was pregnant during basic training. Informed by her command that she would still be required to take part in a mandatory “gas chamber” exercise required for all recruits, Dorothy chose to leave the Army rather than risk possible harm to her baby.

Others, like Lois and Rachel, who were both single mothers, left the military to avoid having to leave their young children while they were deployed. Lois, an African American woman who served 18 years in the Army and said she “loved” the military, explains:

I adopted a baby . . . and at that time they wanted to separate me from my child by sending me to Iran. So I chose to get out. She was only about 2 or 3 months. And I knew that if I had given her to my mother or anybody else . . . when I came back she wouldn't have known me, we wouldn't have that bond . . .

When Rachel was deployed to Afghanistan, she had to leave her daughter with a friend in what ended up being a physically and emotionally unhealthy environment for the child. Rachel spent her deployment worrying about her daughter's well-being. During her interview, she spoke about seeing her daughter for the first time after returning from deployment

I remember the first night I went to see her . . . and she came downstairs, but she didn't know me. Then the next day, when I went back, she was just clinging to me, and my friend [said] “OK, that's enough.” But for [my daughter] it wasn't enough. Mommy had been gone for 4 months.

When Rachel found out she was scheduled for another deployment to Iraq, she decided to separate from the Air Force rather than leave her daughter again.

Angela and Jessica were both forced to leave military service prematurely due to health conditions that the military determined would prevent them from continuing to serve. Angela's story illustrates how mental health problems can be exacerbated in the context of military service, where there may be stigma associated with help seeking; in her case, this eventually led to her leaving the military long before she had intended. Angela is an African American woman, who had a prior history of mild depression and enlisted in the Navy to help pay for her education and because military service was a family tradition. Describing how she ended up leaving the Navy after 6 years and a deployment to Iraq, Angela said:

I had thought I was going to stay in the military a lot longer, but the depression got so bad and I needed help, and I didn't realize that in getting help for my depression I was starting down the road of buying myself a medical discharge . . . your command tells you to get help, and then when you do, it goes on your record. I was no longer considered deployable and so there wasn't really much room for me to move up or keep going . . .

Jessica, an African American woman who entered the Army during the Persian Gulf war era, had difficulty initially adjusting to military life but quickly came to appreciate and value it, leading to a desire to continue in military service to retirement. Circumstances out of her control, however, led to her separation from the military after 10 years of service. During her service, Jessica was in a car

accident that caused a head injury. She received medical treatment, including multiple medications, and one of the medications caused her to have an episode of psychosis. She explained that when she was transferred to a new hospital, “they put me back on my medication and I had another [episode of] psychosis.” The military made a determination that Jessica was to be medically discharged but, with advocacy from her commander about her strengths as a soldier and her plans to continue in the military, she ultimately received a medical retirement, offering her more extensive VA benefits. Still, Jessica was disappointed that she had to leave her military service before she was ready to do so:

I still was upset because . . . I really thought I could come back in and do my job, but they said after what I had been through it would be just too stressful for me.

For other women, traumatic experiences during their period of service, in particular, sexual assaults from peers or superiors, and lack of support in the aftermath of these exposures led to their premature separation. Grace, who served on a Navy vessel in support of the war in Iraq, described how a sexual assault by a superior officer, which went unpunished, led to her premature separation from the military:

After [the assault], I had a lot of nightmares, and I was like a different person. Very timid, never wanted to stand out or volunteer for anything. I know that hurt my career and changed the way people in my unit thought about me . . . I ended up getting out of the military because of that experience . . . I was worried I would have to continue to serve with that man and that he might get me alone and rape me. I had intended to have a career in the Navy and to advance my way up and get an education and see the world, but none of that really happened . . .

Grace observed that she was not alone in her story, that other women left military service prematurely under similar circumstances:

You asked me to tell the story of my military service and this [sexual assault] is really the biggest part of it, because this is the story of why my military career ended before it should have. I want [people] to know what goes on and why women don't stay in.

Similarly, Judith, an African American woman, entered the Navy during the OEF/OIF period with a goal to become captain but, instead, left the service when her first enlistment period was up because of the blame and lack of support she experienced after she was raped on base, an assault which resulted in symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression.

Elizabeth, a 29-year-old woman of mixed race, had planned from an early age to enter the military and loved her service as a mechanic in the Army. She experienced sexual assault during her military service followed by ongoing harassment from her assailant and lack of support from her chain of command. When the actions of her assailant were brought to the attention of her chain of command, she explained, “Their response was not to punish him . . . they just moved me to a different section. Put me behind a desk.” Ultimately, Elizabeth suffered symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the assault and its aftermath and was medically retired from the military against her will. She attributed experiences of depression since her separation from the military to her loss of her military role and status:

I had come in to the Army and found my place, and I had always thought that I would do 20 or 30 years. I had a job that I loved and that I was great at and I made a difference every day . . . I went from high school to knowing exactly who I was and what I wanted and then losing all of it . . . The worst thing they could have done was take me out [of the service]. I probably would have been a lot healthier than I am now if I had been allowed to stay.

Women also shared stories of traumatic combat-related events, which, combined with lack of adequate support and treatment, led to mental health problems that ultimately contributed to premature separation from service. Mary, an Army veteran, shared the story of a seminal event during her last deployment, the aftermath of which directly led to the end of her military career:

We were loading vehicles getting ready for convoy when [I noticed] a young guy, had been in I don't know how many missions, [he] looked emotionless. I pulled the [unit leader] aside and he says, "Hey don't worry about it. He's fine." About two miles out I hear "Boom, boom, boom" in the back. The only person firing is this young guy. He's firing on innocent women and orphaned children . . .

Mary was so deeply traumatized by this incident, which she felt she could have prevented by further pressing for intervention for this young soldier, that she was Medevac'd out, admitted to psychiatric care, and sedated. She was later medically discharged from the Army.

Overall negative experiences, rather than individual events, led other women to exit the military when their initial enlisted period ended, rather than re-enlist as they had initially intended. Tabatha, who served during the Vietnam era and had been hoping for a long-term military career, left after three and a half years because of negative experiences she had as a black woman in a command of all white men:

The way they treated me made me so bitter. They treated me so bad . . . I was determined not to let them break me, but when the time come, I was out of there . . . some of the white men, they treated me like a dog . . . It broke my spirit, but I wouldn't let it break me to the point where I was going to get a dishonorable discharge. I was going to take whatever shit they dished out until that day. That day when I could say, "It's over, it's over."

Betty, a woman of mixed race who served in the Army three decades after Tabatha, in the OEF/OIF era, and also left after three years of service, said: "My time was up and I didn't want to reenlist . . . I just didn't feel like I had that much support from my unit." Betty described feeling prejudice, competition, and an overall lack of camaraderie from her peers and unit commander.

Experiencing Events that Posed a Challenge But Did Not Lead to Premature Exit

We also heard stories from women who did not describe their separation from the military as premature; rather, they felt in control of, and satisfied with, the timing and circumstances around their separation. Tiffany, a 52-year-old white woman, had joined the Navy in the post-Vietnam war era on an impulse; she described her experience as largely positive:

Once I got out to the command and was doing my job, I really loved it. I had a great time . . . I had a lot of fun, I travelled, I lived on a beautiful little island and I enjoyed [my time].

Tiffany attributed her decision not to re-enlist after 4 years of service to likelihood she would be posted in a less desirable location. Instead, she followed some of her colleagues who were leaving the service for jobs with commercial airlines. Tiffany recounted that she had a positive experience, overall, and left the military without regrets about either joining or leaving. Evelyn enlisted in the Army at the age of 19 and served 23 years, eventually retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel after multiple deployments to the Middle East. Ruth, a white woman, retired from the Army after 20 years of service and two deployments to Iraq.

Notably, although these three women did not consider their military separations premature, they all also described experiences of sexual harassment and exposure to other traumatic events during military service. Thus, the absence of premature separation did not indicate entirely positive experiences.

Tiffany described:

That [being with men in the military] was my introduction to sexual harassment . . . Yeah, it wasn't the best of experiences in that way. But most of the men I worked with were respectful and professional and great to work with; [there were] just a handful of knuckleheads.

Evelyn experienced frequent sexual harassment during the early part of her career, culminating in a traumatic experience with a superior who threatened to fail her on a test and scuttle her career if she did not sleep with him:

I have to be honest, I was thinking about doing it [sleeping with him]. I mean, here I was the only woman in my unit and everyone looking at me to fail. If he failed me on that [test], it would mean the end of my advancement and loss of confidence in me. But . . . my friend ended up standing up to the guy and saying he would back me up. And that pretty much ended it.

A common thread in these stories was the presence of nonabusive peers who mitigated the impacts of the harassment.

Reflecting back on her military service, Evelyn observed that the severity and frequency of sexual harassment she experienced lessened as she moved up through the ranks. As she began to command larger numbers of soldiers, Evelyn came to see a major part of her role as creating an atmosphere in which sexual harassment (in fact, intolerance or unprofessional behavior of any kind) was unacceptable and swiftly dealt with, and she saw this stance as the most powerful antidote to counter military sexual trauma:

The more women who get into command positions, the less we'll see the kinds of things I had to put up with early in my career. I'm not saying it [sexual harassment or assault during military service] won't happen, but it will be less tolerated.

Ruth described harassment similar to that experienced by Evelyn and recounted stories of women soldiers who were sexually assaulted during deployments by other U.S. soldiers as well as by third-party nationals serving on base. Ruth also experienced serious combat-related traumas, including seeing burning corpses, being shot at by snipers, and surviving an improvised explosive device attack. Following her second deployment to Iraq, two of Ruth's close colleagues committed suicide and Ruth attempted suicide herself. Ruth received support from her superiors and inpatient treatment from the Army, eventually returning to active duty. Facing the prospect of a third deployment, Ruth instead took a voluntary retirement with full benefits. Despite experiencing severe service-related traumas, Ruth described her military career as a success, suggesting that her conception of what constituted a full and satisfying military career encompassed even clearly negative experiences.

Discussion

Empirical literature on why women enter and leave the military is sparse and has relied primarily on survey-based studies. To better understand the factors driving women's decisions, we interviewed women veterans about the circumstances surrounding their entry into and separation from military service. As opposed to addressing population-based trends, we focused on the decision making and experiences of individual women, from their own perspectives. Our study included a diverse, although nonrepresentative, sample of women veterans, spanning a broad age range, from multiple races and all branches of the military, and who served in multiple eras and for varying lengths of time. Our qualitative approach to the research allowed the women to talk about their experiences and perspectives in their own words, rather than have to fit into predetermined categories. Furthermore, by eliciting women's narratives along a trajectory, rather than focus exclusively on a single time period, we were able to situate

decision making within the broader context of their lives and follow the stories from the initial anticipation and hope at enlistment, to the realities of service, to the (often gendered) circumstances that lead to exiting the service and frequent sense of loss around separation.

Findings from this study contribute to a discussion about women's experiences with military service and can inform policy and practice decisions. This study is not, however, a comprehensive examination of all factors contributing to women's participation in the military. Participants in our study were patients at a single urban VA Medical Center who volunteered to participate in interviews. A strength of our study is that it reflects racial and ethnic diversity of the female military service population in which African American and Latina women are disproportionately represented (Kelty et al., 2010); however, our sample is not representative of the full population of female veterans. While we endeavored to interview women from diverse backgrounds and experiences, we did not set out to recruit a representative or stratified sample. Our findings therefore reflect themes that emerged across women's narratives and we are unable to make comparisons across groups (e.g., period of service, service branch). Such comparisons would require a larger sample and more structured interview questions and are an important topic for future research. We note that military policies have evolved and continue to evolve over time; study participants from older service eras may have served under policies less friendly to women that are no longer in place and experiences of more recent veterans may not be shared by future female service members. Thus, ongoing research is needed to identify and understand the impacts of more recent policies and initiatives particularly as related to women.

Our findings about women's reasons for joining the military (desire to gain access to education and employment opportunities, travel, and escape adverse childhood environments) are consistent with earlier literature (Griffith & Perry, 1993; Pliske et al., 1986; Sadler et al., 2000). Our participants also reported enjoying aspects of military service and finding personal fulfillment, consistent with the personal and professional benefits identified in Patten and Parker's study (2011), such as personal growth, increased self-confidence, and development of vocational and life skills. The key finding that emerged from our study, however, is that events and life circumstances occurring during military service lead some women to separate from the military prematurely, to the potential detriment of both the military and women's lives.

Consistent with the findings from earlier qualitative research (Sims et al., 2005), experiences of sexual assault played a prominent role in women's decision to separate from service. This finding is particularly relevant, given recent media coverage and reports indicating that sexual assaults against women in the military are alarmingly prevalent (Kimerling et al., 2010). Women in our study shared stories that demonstrated a direct connection between experiencing such an assault and developing mental health problems that contributed to their separation from service; many saw these events as robbing them of opportunities they had hoped to gain through enlisting in the military. Additionally, some women observed that it was the military's handling of their sexual assault cases—and in particular the sense of betrayal and risk of being assaulted again when women were put in the position of continuing to serve with or under the perpetrator—that played a primary role in their decision to separate from service.

The complex challenges of pregnancy and caregiving also factor significantly into women's ability to continue service in the military. Conflicts between responsibilities of parenting and military service have long been identified as a challenge for female service members, and other research has shown that concerns about balancing a military career with motherhood responsibilities to be predictors of intentions to leave the military (Huffman, Culbertson, & Castro, 2008; Kelley et al., 2001; Shields, 1988). Women in our study cited the difficulties of being separated from their children for long time periods as a reason for ending military service. These difficulties were both emotional and practical, including limited stable and safe placement options for children while mothers were deployed.

Although many of the challenges women face while serving in the military, including harassment, assault, impediments to caregiving, and lack of social support, also occur for women serving in other male-dominated professions, the military is unique as a workplace setting, amplifying the opportunity

for and impact of these challenges. Military service offers opportunities and benefits different from, and unmatched by, those available through civilian employment. In addition to material benefits, the military provides structure and community as well as symbolic benefits of a sense of purpose and clear roles that can strengthen one's sense of identity and belonging. Recent research by Smith and True (2014) highlights the material and symbolic benefits of continued military service as well as the heightened mental distress experienced by veterans who are forced to separate from service earlier than desired. This echoes the sentiments of many women in our study, who expressed a sense of loss of identity, purpose, and potential when they left the military prematurely due to circumstances beyond their control.

Although women from diverse backgrounds may have shared experiences related to military service, it is also important to consider how the military functions within the larger social milieu. Women we interviewed described experiencing multiple forms of oppression within and outside military service that often contributed to individual decisions to enter and leave the military including poverty, abuse, violence, addiction, racism, classism, heterosexism, and other social conditions that impact women's lives. Thus, it is critical to recognize the intersectionality of such experiences within each woman's life course, and how gender functions not independently but in connection with other identities and experiences (cf. Crenshaw, 1991).

Implications

The military's increasing inclusion of women presents both increased parity between men's and women's opportunities as well as a tension within feminism, given views of the military as an inherently patriarchal institution and war as inherently antifeminist (Berlatsky, 2013; Carter, 1996). There is evidence that some women seek the unique opportunities afforded by military service and enjoy aspects of serving in the military and that women continue to face gender-based challenges to fulfilling military service expectations. The question for social workers, who are guided to operate from a strengths-based approach, value an individual's right to self-determination, and support individual and group empowerment, is not *whether or not* to support women's role in the military but *how* (at the same time, however, social workers and feminists may continue to challenge the presence and operations of the military).

Whether working within the military or a veterans' service organization, or with women outside of these settings, social workers need to be knowledgeable about the opportunities and risks associated with military service as well as the broad range of experiences that women have with military service. Social workers may work with women who are considering joining, or have already joined the military, and can help women identify their internal and external resources to meet their goals and seek greater empowerment in their decisions to enter, leave, or continue military service. Those working with veterans also need to understand the types of challenges, and benefits, that women experience in military service and the potential losses associated with separation from the military. Social workers may also advocate more broadly for a more gender-sensitive military environment through policy, practice, and education.

Premature separation from military service represents a loss of resources for women and for the military as high turnover among military personnel bears significant costs in recruitment and training (Lancaster et al., 2013; Sims et al., 2005). Although there have been specific efforts to expand recruitment of women into military service and policies have evolved recently to grant women access to a greater range of military positions in combat and leadership (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2011), much of the literature and efforts to increase retention have focused exclusively on men and/or financial incentives (e.g., Asch, Mattock, & Hosek, 2013; Mann, 2012). Discussions of military retention and recruitment center around an economic analysis, often overlooking individual experiences and accounting for unintended factors that may be particularly salient for women.

Gender-based conditions—such as harassment, caregiving demands, and a male-dominant culture—that lead to premature separation among women represent a disparity in resource access. As Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal (2010) summarize, “the additional stressors placed on women in the military may cause them to leave the service prematurely, with real consequences to the development of their own human capital through schooling, training, and leadership experience and also through potential forfeiture of benefits tied to career service” (p. 186). Our findings highlight points of intervention that may mitigate losses due to premature separation.

Public health interventions are often framed around three levels of prevention: primary (to prevent an event or disease), secondary (to prevent symptoms or negative impacts for indicated or at-risk cases), and tertiary (to promote recovery and prevent further morbidity once a disease or event has occurred). Applied to the case of premature separation, primary prevention would include interventions to prevent factors that lead to premature separation; for example, preventing sexual harassment and assault and creating a climate that is less hostile and more welcoming to women as service members. Through various initiatives, the military has sought to increase the acceptability of military service to women, including attempts to address violence against women. Kanuha, Erwin, and Pence (2004) described an unlikely partnership between the U.S. Marine Corps and an antiviolence advocacy organization that developed a coordinated community response to domestic violence in the Marines, including extensive education and policy changes. This program was successful on a small scale but unfortunately was eliminated by military leadership that identified challenges to existing military structure and norms. Social workers can continue to advocate on individual (micro) and macro levels to improve conditions for women in the military and encourage military leadership to adopt and foster such initiatives.

Once an event like harassment or trauma has occurred, secondary prevention efforts can be used to prevent that event from leading to premature exit. Developing cultural norms and practices that offer support in response to traumatic experiences and reward (rather than punishment) for seeking mental health care when needed may help prevent other women from exiting the military prematurely due to negative aftermath of trauma experiences. In response to high-profile cases of interpersonal violence and suicides among military personnel that have come to public attention through mass media, the military has instituted structures and protocols to increase reporting and receipt of services. In the era of the all-volunteer force that calls for increased reliance on female service members, policies related to pregnancy and caregiving also continue to evolve to support women’s sustained service in the military.

Tertiary prevention efforts would be targeted to women who have separated from the military prematurely, and are now veterans, who may suffer from a loss of career and employment, and military-related benefits, in addition to possible negative or traumatic experiences they endured during military service. The VA serves as a tertiary prevention service through provision of mental and medical health care, employment and educational opportunities, and housing and economic supports, yet only a portion of women veterans utilize VA services. Addressing a historical lack of service to women (Huynh-Hohnbaum, Damron-Rodriguez, Washington, Villa, & Harada, 2003), the VA has recently increased its outreach and coordination of care for women veterans through programs such as the Women Veterans Call Center and Women Veteran Program Managers at each VA Medical Center. Nongovernmental organizations that provide care to women veterans can also provide services to mitigate the losses associated with premature separation.

Making the military a more welcoming and less adversarial institution for women, and recognizing the intersection between women’s lives and military service opportunities, could help prevent loss of personnel resources to the military and benefits of military service to women service members and veterans. Additionally, such efforts would reduce gender-based disparities in military service, benefits, and experiences.

Authors' Note

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Author Biographies

Melissa Dichter is a Core Investigator at the Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion (CHERP) at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Dr. Dichter's research focuses on women veterans experiences and psychosocial healthcare needs.

Gala True is a Core Investigator at the Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion (CHERP) at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and a Research Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine. Dr. True's research focuses on building military cultural competency among health care providers and improving post-deployment health and community reintegration of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans.