

Gender Issues in the U.S. Military

Annotated Bibliography for 2016 NEH Summer Institute on Veterans in Society

Beth Ann Koelsch

University of North Carolina, Greensboro

History of Women in the U.S. Military

Murdoch, Maureen, Arlene Bradley, Susan H. Mather, Robert E. Klein, Carole L. Turner, and Elizabeth M. Yano. "Women and War." *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 21, no. S3 (March 1, 2006): S5–10.

This article was written for physicians who treat women veterans outside of the Veterans Administration health care system. Rather than focusing on medical issues, the authors provide a well-crafted summary of the history of the women in the U.S. military. The final sections address the possible health issues resulting from women's military service by highlighting sexual harassment and assault, combat stress, and exposure to environmental toxic chemicals. The authors conclude with the recommendation that physicians ask about the specifics of women veterans' military service in order to improve their diagnoses.

This article would be useful as an introduction for anyone, not just health professionals, wanting a basic historical overview of women in the U.S. military.

Identity and Gender

"Women Warriors: Supporting Female Student Veterans." *ASHE Higher Education Report* 37, no. 3 (2011).

The article begins by describing historic discriminatory policies against women in the U.S. military and asserts that this discrimination "in many ways parallels the devaluation of women as workers in American society in general." The authors then argue that even though the numbers of women in the U.S. military are rising, and that women now have greater opportunities in the military than they did in the past, military women and women veterans continue to deal with the repercussions of their "transgressing" traditional gender roles. The authors contend that the increase in military sexual trauma (MST) incidents is a consequence of women's greater participation, and cite statistics that female student veterans report an almost 15% higher rate of sexual assault than do civilian students. Referencing the Baechtold and De Sawal 2011 article *Meeting the Needs of Women Veterans*, the authors state that women veterans not only suffer from military sexual trauma, and that they also have a higher rate of PTSD than do male veterans for similar combat-related injuries, but that women veterans' PTSD is also underdiagnosed.

Asserting that "manliness" is the only gender role option in the military, the authors contend that women in the military are encroaching on designated "male turf" and that they suffer backlash (such as sexual assault) for their "intrusion."

The discussion then moves to an analysis of the differences between the "moral decision making" between men and women and the argument that these gendered differences (e.g. women have the ethics of "care and responsibility" and men have the ethics of "rights and justice") lead to variations between male and female veterans' understanding of their experiences in the military.

The authors next discuss how gender differences influence the way female student veterans adapt to college. They concede that there are similar challenges that all student veterans face, but that women veterans also face additional gender-based challenges. Women student veterans have reported their feelings of being "unheard" and "invalidated" by their fellow students and professors, a view also held by civilian female students.

The article concludes with suggestions to help female student veterans succeed in college, but these suggestions would be equally beneficial for male veterans. The authors bring up important issues surrounding gender, but the article's conclusions do not prove a strong distinction between the needs of female and male student veterans.

Pawelczyk Joanna. "Constructing American Female War Veterans' Military Identity in the Context of Interviews." *Women & Language* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 87–111.

This article uses discourse analysis of transcripts of women Army veterans' oral histories from the Library of Congress Veterans History Project to illustrate how gender biases affect the understanding, by both the women veterans themselves and by their male interviewers, of their professional identity as military veterans.

Pawelczyk first discusses how the military is a "gendered workplace" that is predicated on masculine traits and values, and that this hegemonic masculinity devalues women in the military. Women try to negotiate what Howard and Prividera have termed the "female soldier paradox", whether one can be a woman and a soldier at the same time.

The article then describes how the implicit and explicit gender biases of interviewers affect both the content as well as the delivery of the questions asked, and that these biases affect how the interviewees frame their own experiences.

From her analysis of the interviews Pawelczyk identifies five "discursive strategies" used by women veterans to validate their military identities: Framing their military experiences as combat-related, discussing their expertise with their military job responsibilities, describing themselves as "tough and agentive" as the masculine ethos of the military demands, distancing themselves from the category of "woman", and rejecting the concept of mentally damaged veteran in order to not display any weakness.

Pawelczyk concludes that women veterans, while believing in the fundamental idea of soldier as a masculine and male, have also redefined this "symbolic category" to allow themselves to identify as a veteran. She predicts that as women move into combat roles this dichotomy in how women veterans define themselves will lessen.

Grohowski, Mariana. "Moving Words / Words That Move: Language Practices Plaguing U.S. Servicewomen." *Women & Language* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 121–30.

Grohowski interviewed over forty male and female active military personnel and veterans to examine how derogatory language practices against women reinforces the idea of the military as a male-only prerogative and damages women service personnel and women veterans. She draws upon her interviews as well as memoirs, documentary films, and congressional testimonies to provide examples of misogynist language practices with nicknames and military cadences ("jody calls"). Grohowski asserts that the unofficially sanctioned prevalence of such language leads to the marginalization of women in the military and creates an atmosphere that can lead to discrimination, harassment and assault.

The author then describes some of the methods women veterans are employing to repair the damage they have suffered due to abuse from their fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines. She specifies that various social media communities and art projects are effective ways for healing, bringing attention to these issues, and leading to change in the military culture.

Grohowski concludes with three suggestions on how others can facilitate change: Listening to women veterans talk about their experiences, sharing information about available benefits and resources for which they are eligible, and advocating for change in the military culture.

Women Veterans Representations

Hoffman, Cara. "The Things She Carried." *The New York Times*, March 31, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/01/opinion/the-things-she-carried.html>

Hoffman is a novelist, essayist, and writing and literature instructor. Although not a veteran herself, she

comes from a military family and often addresses veterans' issues in her writing.

This *New York Times* op-ed piece decries women veterans' lack of recognition in veterans' communities, the cultural conversation, and by the overall general public. Hoffman relates anecdotal stories about the invisibility of women combat veterans. She points out that even though women veterans endure the same physical, emotional, and spiritual injuries as male combat veterans, they also disproportionately suffer from sexual assault by fellow military personnel. She asserts that their invisibility inflicts even more damage upon women veterans, and that recognition by writers, filmmakers, and other artists would improve women veterans' societal status and their sense of self-worth. Hoffman concludes that society as a whole would benefit from a cultural focus on women veterans in that these stories have "the power to change and enrich our understanding of war" as well as potentially affecting our "culture, our art, our nation and our lives."

Williams, Kayla. "Women Writing War: A List of Essential Contemporary War Literature by Women." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. May 26, 2014. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/women-writing-war-list-essential-contemporary-war-literature-women/>.

Williams is a U.S. Army 101st Airborne Division veteran who deployed to Iraq and Kuwait from 2003-2004 and wrote two celebrated memoirs about her military experience. This article is an expanded version of a blog post Williams wrote to rebut Cara Hoffman's 2014 *New York Times* op-ed "The Things She Carried". Williams points out that the numbers of American women veterans are rapidly increasing and that recent women veterans have served in many more positions, and had a greater variety of experiences in the military, than in any time in the past.

The article continues by listing five OIF U.S. women veterans' memoirs, one novel by a women OIF veteran, a memoir by a transgender Navy SEAL veteran, a book of short stories by a non-veteran woman about soldiers and civilians during OIF/OEF, and eight anthologies of writing by both male and female veterans of the recent conflicts. Williams also mentions creative writing anthologies by women veterans who served pre-9/11 and oral history collections to reinforce her argument. The article concludes with a plea to all women veterans to add their voices to the cultural discourse by working with veterans' writing and arts organizations.

Beyond Gender

Wendy Ashley & Jodi Constantine Brown. The Impact of Combat Status on Veterans' Attitudes Toward Help Seeking: The Hierarchy of Combat Elitism, *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work*, 12:5 (2011): 534-542.

Social work researchers Ashley and Brown surveyed twenty-four U.S. military veterans about their attitudes about whether or not non-combat veterans were deserving of mental health services for their military-related issues. The authors found that the hyper-masculine warrior ethos of the military devalues all non-combat service and this leads to the attitude of "combat elitism" among veterans. This view generates a sense of worthlessness in non-combat veterans.

The article asserts that with the major crises of suicide, traumatic brain injuries, substance abuse, PTSD, homelessness, and unemployment among veterans makes the fact that only one half of veterans needing mental health services actually seek out professional help exceptionally problematic. Drawing upon studies that show that veterans are inclined to only trust other veterans, the authors make the case that veterans' negative attitudes about the relative worth of non-combat veterans' service ensures that non-combat veterans are unlikely to feel that they deserve help.

Although the study only looked at male veterans, the perniciousness of the non-combat veteran stigma would equally apply to female veterans who until 2016 had been barred from combat roles.