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SURVEY**

2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

Finding 6

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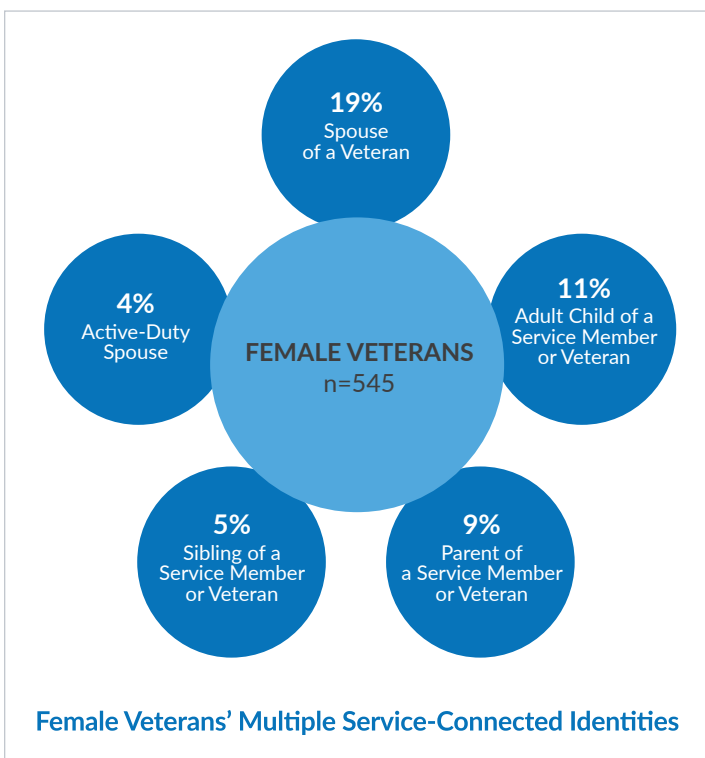
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Throughout the military life cycle, female service member respondents face greater challenges with balancing military and family life and report more negative experiences associated with service than their male counterparts.

Female service members experience active-duty service differently than their male counterparts. To start, active-duty military family members are less likely to recommend service to their female relatives in the first place,¹ and females who join do so for different reasons than their male colleagues.² Moreover, their experiences, both in uniform and their transition back into civilian life, all follow a somewhat different trajectory than those of their male colleagues. These differences can be a reinforcing cycle and a barrier to increasing gender diversity in the armed forces. Overall, the Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) has found that female service members and female veteran respondents perceive a poorer command climate, face greater challenges balancing military and family life, and report more negative service-related experiences than their male peers.

“There is never adequate coverage of female service members. We need uniforms, child care, and medical care designed for us ... Also, the height and weight standards for female service members is the largest contributor to eating disorders and one of the highest to stress and separation.” — Female Marine Service Member



MULTIPLE SERVICE-CONNECTED IDENTITIES

Results from the 2020 MFLS showed that a good proportion of respondents whose primary identity is a female veteran (n=545) are also connected to the military in multiple ways; 19% are also the spouse of another veteran, 11% are the adult child of another service member or veteran, and 4% are active-duty spouses. Aside from those identities, 9% are the parents of a service member or veteran, and 5% are siblings of a service member or veteran. For female veterans, the military is a family tradition. For male respondents whose primary identity in the survey is a veteran (n=1367), 6% are the adult child of a service member or veteran, 5% are parents of a service member or veteran, 4% are a sibling of a service member, 3% are spouses of another veteran, and fewer than 1% are active-duty spouses.

“Senior chief made a comment to other males about me. I tried to report it and the chief that was responsible for that **told me that the senior chief didn’t mean anything by it and refused to continue with it.**” — Female Navy Spouse and Veteran

Despite preliminary evidence of a multi-layered service-related identity, females are in fact less likely to have military service recommended to them by active-duty family members. Blue Star Families’ 2018 MFLS found that active-duty service member respondents were more likely to recommend service to their sons versus their daughters (51% versus 39%). Moreover, previous Blue Star Families research suggests that female active-duty service members have different motivations for joining and may not see the military as a viable long-term career, with female active-duty service member respondents indicating their top reason for joining the military was educational benefits (60%), rather than retirement benefits (32%).³ Given the underlying incentives, it may be unsurprising that only 17% of active-duty service members are female.⁴

“I’ve been denied promotion because I had children. I can’t go to military schools while pregnant or postpartum. Therefore, I’m put **at least 18 months behind my male peers** for EACH CHILD.” — Female Army Service Member

FEMALE SERVICE MEMBERS AT WORK

Once female service member respondents start their military careers, their experiences differ from those of their male peers. Female active-duty service member respondents’ perceptions of their unit leadership are less positive than their male peers. For example, fewer female active-duty service member respondents agreed they feel a sense of belonging to their unit/command, compared to their male peers (41% vs. 52%).

While both male and female service member respondents agreed there is gender discrimination in the military, a greater proportion of female service members agreed (68% of female vs. 34% of male) that this is the case. A greater proportion of female active-duty service member respondents than male also reported they experienced gender-based discrimination in their unit or command (48% vs. 4%), in military-connected training opportunities (26% vs. 4%), and in promotion or advancement opportunities (37% vs. 10%). This is consistent with previous reports that female service members often experience gender-based discrimination and are not promoted

“I didn’t expect to separate, but my unit was unwilling to work with me or my spouse to accommodate our schedules for the baby we were expecting. I ended up separating due to pregnancy as a result. **I was a high-achieving and high-performing airman, and my unit did nothing to try to retain me in the service, so separation was a bit unexpected.**” — Female Air Force Veteran, Active-duty Spouse

FEMALE SERVICE MEMBER MILITARY LIFE CYCLE

Service member respondents are less likely to recommend service to daughters than sons (39% vs. 51%; 2018 MFLS).

Female service member respondents are more likely to join for education benefits than retirement benefits (60% vs. 32%), indicating they may not see the military as a long-term career (2018 MFLS).

48% of female service member respondents have experienced gender discrimination in their unit/command.

Female service member respondents reported less belonging to the unit and were less likely to report their unit has good communication and leadership.

13% of female service member respondents experienced sexual harassment in the past year.

37% have experienced gender discrimination in promotion or advancement opportunities;
26% have experienced it in military-connected training.

at the same rates as male service members.⁵ Furthermore, most female active-duty service member respondents (74%) reported they have experienced gender discrimination. Fifty-two percent of female active-duty service members stated they did not report the most recent incident of gender discrimination from a military-connected setting. Only 47% of female service members who experienced military-connected gender discrimination recommend service to a young person.

Experiences often extend past discrimination to acts of hostility, such as sexual harassment and assault, long noted as an issue for female service members.⁶ The DoD has noted that respectful and healthy workplace climates reduce the risk of sexual assault and recognizes the need for command leadership in emphasizing the importance of sexual assault prevention.⁷ Despite efforts to address sexual harassment and assault,⁸ more than one in 10 (13%) female service member respondents indicated experiencing sexual harassment within the past year, and yet very few of female active-duty service member respondents (n=5) reported the most recent incident of sexual harassment.

FEMALE SERVICE MEMBERS AT HOME

Female service members who choose to partner and build families face increasing challenges to their military career, as obligations for family and household compete and are sometimes incompatible with active-duty service. A 2019 DoD report noted more female service members are in dual-military marriages compared to their male peers (20% vs. 4%).⁹ In our survey, 29% of female active-duty service member respondents are in a dual-military marriage, compared to 4% of male active-duty respondents who reported the same. Dual-military marriages can be a challenge to maintain. In fact, two in 10 (19%) female active-duty service member respondents reported one of the reasons they would leave the military, other than medical or administrative discharge, would be because “being in a dual-military family is too difficult,” compared to only 3% of male active-duty service member respondents who reported the same. While the lack of high-quality child care is a widespread issue that challenges military and civilian families alike,¹⁰ female active-duty service member respondents are particularly affected by these difficulties with a third (33%) reporting it is a top concern in military life, compared to only 15% of male service members. Aside from child care issues, female service member respondents also reported spending more hours per day on household and child care responsibilities than their male service member peers (5.5 hours vs. 4.3 hours per day, on average). This is a weekly difference of 8.4 hours.

Female service member respondents reported significantly more hours per day (5.5 vs. 4.3) spent on household responsibilities than their male service member peers.

Nearly 2 in 10 (19%) female service member respondents would leave the military (other than for retirement or medical/administrative discharge) because “being in a dual-military family is too difficult,” compared to 3% of their male peers.

Child care is a top issue for 33% of female service member respondents, compared to only 15% of their male peers.

Female service member respondents are more likely to leave the military before retirement eligibility than their male peers. They are also more likely to cite family-related reasons (vs. career opportunities) when deciding to leave the service.

Transitioning male service member respondents intend to do similar work after the military at twice the rate of their female service member peers (41% vs. 27%).

RETENTION OF FEMALE ACTIVE-DUTY SERVICE MEMBERS

This imbalance of home-life responsibilities, combined with gender discrimination and possible concerns and experiences of sexual harassment and assault in their workplace, are reasons female service members are leaving service before retirement eligibility is reached.¹¹ In the MFLS, there is a greater proportion of female veteran respondents who left service due to medical or administrative discharge (22%) compared to their male peers (15%), and a smaller proportion of retired female veterans (44%), compared to male retired veterans (56%). Additionally, excluding those who left service due to retirement or medical or administrative discharge, more male veteran respondents reported leaving service because of work or education opportunities, such as feeling “more valued and/or able to earn more money in the private sector” (24%), compared to 12% of female veteran respondents who said the same. In contrast, female veteran respondents registered a higher proportion in a cluster of reasons related to challenges in balancing family life with a military career, such as “concerns about the impact of military service on my family” (27%), compared to 16% of male veteran respondents. Finally, excluding those who retired from military service, 4% of veteran respondents said one of the reasons they left was because of gender-based discriminations, and 7% reported sexual harassment or assault as a reason. This percentage jumped to one in 10 (10%) for gender discrimination and 16% for sexual harassment or assault when exclusively looking at the experiences of female veteran respondents.

IMPLICATIONS

Service experiences are complex, and experiences of gender-based discrimination, harassment, assault, and general life challenges often occur alongside positive experiences of meaningful work and camaraderie with peers. Nonetheless, data from the 2020 MFLS showed that challenges such as gender discrimination and sexual harassment and assault affect female active-duty service members disproportionately compared to their male peers. These negative experiences related to military service can have long-term implications on both retention and recruitment of females to active-duty service and run counter to DoD efforts at increasing diversity.¹² In contrast, research shows that a positive experience from reporting an incident leads to decreased emotional distress and a stronger intention of retention.¹³ Additionally, service members take all of these factors into consideration when recommending service to a younger generation, so reducing challenges and eliminating discrimination and harassment may be necessary for a sustainable pipeline of recruiting and retaining a gender diverse military.

Transitioning female service member respondents reported less time to prepare for transition; 46% reported they had less than a year or no preparation at all, compared to 31% of transitioning male service member respondents.

16% of female veteran respondents reported one of the reasons they left military service were sexual harassment or assault, and 10% indicated gender-based discrimination as one of the reasons. 24% of female veteran respondents highlighted military sexual trauma as a key challenge in their transition.

Many female veterans remain closely tied to the military as active-duty spouses; 5% of active-duty spouse respondents were also veterans, and 4% of female veteran respondents were also active-duty spouses.

Female veteran respondents' top transitioning challenges are loss of connection to military community (59%) and loss of a sense of purpose (59%), followed by navigating the VA healthcare system (54%) and finding employment (52%).

Yet, 69% of female veteran respondents would recommend service to a young person.

RECOMMENDATIONS



MILITARY

- Standardize, expedite, simplify, and expand the Career Intermision Program (CIP) application process for service members who are unable to implement their Family Care Plan due to an unexpected extended emergency (such as virtual schooling during a pandemic).*
- Revamp military manpower assumptions to allow for flexible career timelines and adaptable personnel policies, including replacing “up-or-out” requirements to allow families (especially dual military) to balance career aspirations with whole-family success.¹⁴
- Work to improve access to affordable, high-quality child care [see Child Care Recommendations].

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report



CONGRESS

- Implement Fort Hood Independent Review Committee recommendations across the Services to alleviate instances of sexual harrasement, assault, and gender discrimination.
- Require military schools and training programs to waive their physical fitness requirements for pregnant and recently pregnant service members looking to enroll.
- Commission a report on the benefits of expanding CIP to account for general family emergencies beyond the failure to implement a Family Care Plan. (This report should assess the impact of such an expansion on individual/family resilience and Total Family Force readiness.)

LIMITATIONS

The 2020 MFLS oversampled both female active-duty service members and female veterans. Females make up 50% of active-duty service member respondents but only 17% of the military.¹⁵ Similarly, 29% of veteran respondents identify as female while only 10% of the overall veteran population is female.¹⁶ While not reflective of the general active-duty and veteran populations, the robust number of female respondents in those categories allows us to analyze and report their responses with greater confidence. Nonetheless, topics such as discrimination are highly sensitive, and these findings are limited to survey respondents’ self-reporting of experiences, which inevitably introduces biases.

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