



THE MISSION CONTINUES



HER MISSION CONTINUES: SERVICE AND REINTEGRATION AMONGST POST-9/11 WOMEN VETERANS

*A Research Brief from The Mission Continues Research & Evaluation Team
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women make up more than 16% of the post-9/11 veteran population – the highest percentage in American history.ⁱ These veterans are significantly more likely to have experienced combat compared with women who served in prior eras. They are also younger, more diverse, more likely to struggle with unemployment, and they experience reintegration into civilian life differently from their male peers.ⁱⁱ Perhaps because of these factors, women veterans are participating in The Mission Continues programs at high rates – more than 34% of our Fellows are women, as are 31% of platoon members.

In April 2015 we set out to learn more about how women veterans experience reintegration and why they are coming to The Mission Continues in such high numbers. We launched a qualitative study of 256 fellowship Alumni. 71 Alumni shared their perspectives on what it means to be a woman veteran in the post-9/11 era. While some Alumni insisted that their gender had no impact of their service or reintegration, a majority reported significant differences.

Nearly three-fourths (72%) of our Alumni felt they had fewer career opportunities in the military, and more than 50% experienced harassment, discrimination or marginalization. 82% reported that their readjustment to civilian life was difficult, and only 37% reported feeling recognized, respected and valued as veterans in civilian life. In short, women have to fight for recognition during and after their military service.

Given what we know about the importance of social belonging and community connection during reintegration, this is a real problem. If our Alumni's experiences are any indication, a lack of recognition and respect is making readjusting to civilian life unnecessarily difficult for women veterans across the country. The good news is that our programs are making a difference:

- 94% of our Alumni reported that they felt comfortable and included within The Mission Continues culture, compared with 19% in civilian culture as a whole.
- 90% reported that they felt respected and valued as a veteran, compared with 37% in civilian culture.
- 72% reported that they formed bonds with civilians through The Mission Continues, compared with 30% who said the same about their reintegration.

Combined with the personal and professional growth we measure in each fellowship class, these results suggest that our programs offer a unique value for women veterans – not only helping them reach their goals, but offering them a renewed sense of respect and recognition. This year, our team will make a coordinated push to highlight women veterans' military service and continued service with The Mission Continues. Through our programs, communications and research, we will raise awareness of the value women veterans offer their communities and ensure they receive the recognition they are due.

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INTRODUCTION

The Mission Continues is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering military veterans to find new missions of service here at home. Since 2007, the organization's Fellowship Program has provided more than 1200 veterans with the opportunity to serve for six months at a nonprofit organization of their choice while working towards personal and professional goals. The Service Platoon Program, launched in 2013, engages more than 3,800 veterans in team-based service to their communities.

These programs help veterans fully reintegrate into their communities. This means supporting veterans' employment, education, health and financial stability, as well as their sense of purpose, social relationships, civic engagement and connection with community. The Mission Continues' programs focus on post-9/11 veterans, as this generation is the most recently separated from the military and these veterans are more likely to struggle with their readjustment.ⁱⁱⁱ

One of the defining features of the post-9/11 generation is that this generation includes the highest percentage of women veterans in American history. Women make up more than 16% of the post-9/11 veteran population. Despite the Combat Exclusion Policy in place until early 2013, these women veterans are significantly more likely to have experienced combat compared with women who served in prior eras. They are also younger, more diverse, less likely to be married and more likely to be single parents than their male peers.

These women veterans are participating in The Mission Continues programs at high rates – 34% of Mission Continues Fellows are women veterans, as are 31% of service platoon members. In an effort to understand the reasons for this high rate of participation, The Mission Continues has launched a qualitative study of these women veterans' military, reintegration and civic service experiences. Through an online survey and qualitative analysis, this paper explores women veterans' reintegration into civilian life with a focus on their perspectives and personal experiences during and after military service.

WOMEN VETERANS' REINTEGRATION

While women veterans share many experiences, strengths and challenges with their male peers, they also differ in several important ways. In general, women veterans are significantly younger and more diverse than male veterans. They are less likely to be married during and after their time in the military. They are more likely to have served in an administrative or medical role and far less likely to have deployed to a combat zone. Women veterans also differ from their male peers with respect to mental health, employment opportunities and reintegration into their communities.

Mental Health

30% of women who served in the Post-9/11 era were deployed to a combat zone and studies suggest that they may be more likely to experience PTSD after these deployments. Women are also much more likely to experience sexual harassment and military sexual trauma (MST) during their time in the military. While VA has taken steps to improve access to mental healthcare, women veterans still have a harder time accessing an essential and well-documented “immunizing factor” against long-term mental health issues – social support.^{vi}

In both the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, formal support groups for women tend to be concentrated on the spouses of male veterans, rather than women who actually serve and deploy in the military.^{vii} Many of the national veteran services organizations that play a vital role in bringing veterans together for social support have been traditionally designed for male veterans. For example, the Veterans of Foreign Wars only amended their charter to be inclusive of women veterans in November 2014.^{viii}

In short, despite acknowledgment that women experience stress from their military experiences differently than men (and often prefer to process their experiences through interaction with other women)^{ix}, there are limited structured opportunities for women veterans to connect with others who can relate to their experiences and support them during their reintegration. The relatively small number of women veterans can make it even more difficult for them to connect with each other. This can have a negative impact on women veterans’ mental health and their successful reintegration into to civilian life.

Employment

Women veterans face a consistently higher unemployment rate compared with male veterans of similar age and service experience. This issue overlaps with the related issue of military spouse unemployment – many women veterans are also military spouses (48% of married women in the military are married to a fellow service member). Many women veterans remain married to an active duty service member even after leaving the military themselves,^x which presents multiple barriers to employment, including frequent relocation and more extensive domestic responsibilities while a spouse is deployed.

Women also express less confidence their military skills will be transferable to civilian careers. Despite working in technical and administrative roles at a higher rate than male peers in the military, women are less successful at obtaining equivalent employment in civilian life.^{xi} Overall, the unemployment rate for women veterans has improved at a slower rate than that of male veterans and female civilians, with accompanying consequences for women veterans’ financial stability and long-term career prospects.^{xii} The specific reasons for higher unemployment amongst women veterans are a subject for further research,^{xiii} but the trend is clear.

Purpose and Community

Studies have found that women are more likely to identify interpersonal relationships as a source of significant stress after leaving the military.^{xiv} Other surveys suggest women veterans prioritize a renewed sense of purpose and making finding meaning from their experiences.^{xv} Finding a sense of purpose and community may pose unique challenges for women veterans, who are less likely to access social support and feel less recognized for their service compared with their male counterparts, due in part of culture biases that minimize the idea of women as troops on the front lines.^{xcvi}

Women veterans report a high rate of volunteerism and a strong desire to continue to serve after leaving the military. Post-9/11 veterans volunteer at roughly twice the rate of the civilian population. Women veterans are no exception.^{xvii} Their desire to serve and engage with community organizations may be related to their focus on strengthening interpersonal relationships and finding a renewed sense of purpose after their military service ends.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

Women veterans' experiences with respect to employment, education, access to healthcare and interaction with service providers are well documented. However, while there is considerable anecdotal evidence that social and community dimensions of reintegration pose unique challenges for women veterans, few studies have investigated their personal experiences during reintegration into their communities. This study draws on personal experiences of women who participated in The Mission Continues Fellowship Program. Using web-based surveys and follow-up interviews, we explore the challenges women veterans can face as well as the unique strengths and skills they bring to their communities. Our goal is to better understand how social and community factors impact women during their military service and reintegration into their communities.

This paper uses qualitative data from a survey of 256 Alumni of The Mission Continues Fellowship Program who participated in the program between January 2012 and April 2015. These Alumni received a web-based survey that included questions measuring respondents' perception of social connectedness, belonging within military and civilian culture, and the opportunities available to them. A number of open-ended questions asked respondents to reflect on their experience in the military, their reintegration into civilian life and their involvement with The Mission Continues.

No incentives were offered, but potential participants did receive three reminder emails over a period of two weeks asking them to complete the survey. A total of 71 women veterans responded to the survey, and 62 completed all of the open-ended questions. Unless otherwise noted, the data presented here reflects the responses of all 71 women who completed the survey. Because of selection bias, a limited sampling frame and small sample size the findings presented here are not generalizable to the overall population of women veterans. Instead, our goal is to shed light on the personal side of women veterans' service and reintegration through an analysis of their perceptions and open-ended responses.

SURVEY RESULTS – MILITARY EXPERIENCE

Survey participants reported a strong sense of camaraderie with both male and female service members during their military service, with 70% of respondents reporting that they formed strong bonds with their peers. However, other aspects of military service presented a challenge. Just 58% of respondents agreed that they felt respected and valued as a service member. 82% of respondents reported they had the same opportunities as their female peers in the military, but just 38% agreed they had the same opportunities as men. The focus on challenges continued in open-ended responses. The overall trend was that women felt overlooked, subjected to discrimination and in some cases targeted for harassment or abuse. However a few women noted positive experiences or expressed that their gender had no impact on their service.

Many respondents focused on the challenges of being a woman in a male dominated institution, with a quarter of respondents (15) specifically reporting they felt they had to work harder than male peers to prove themselves. As one respondent put it, "I know that I had to fight to be respected. I had to EARN respect from my male counterparts." Another Marine Corps veteran wrote that:

"Being a woman greatly impacted my military experience. I had to work three times as hard just to be seen at the same level as my male counter parts. With that, when I was successful, male Marines downplayed my success to something that I got "easily" because I am a woman."

Some respondents felt they were judged not only for their personal abilities, but also for the perceived abilities of women service members in general. One woman wrote, "I fought my entire career to prove I was as good at my job as the men. The bad reputation of females before me hindered me at every turn." Another described the negative impact these perceptions had on her career progress, stating that, and "I felt disrespected, mistreated and wasn't promoted as fast as males." Yet another cited outright discrimination, writing that, "Being a woman in the military I felt that I had to work twice as hard as my male peers to prove that I was not a stereotype." I was also denied an evaluation score that I deserved because I was a woman."

For some women veterans their experience changed as they progressed in rank and responsibility. One Air Force veteran noted, "I think in the beginning of my career, men looked at me as a woman instead of an Airman. But, as I progressed in rank and positions, those views changed." Another veteran explained that while being a woman in the military was difficult, she gained confidence through her service:

"I was internally challenged and motivated to know that I can accomplish anything I put my mind and dedication to. Being a woman in the military and also a person in authority was a double-edged sword. I was challenged to always exceed the standard and at times questioned because I was a woman."

A few women veterans reported overall positive experiences. One veteran wrote that she "...was in a unit where males and females were treated equally and our camaraderie was strong. Even when working and interacting with males outside of my unit, I was treated as an equal. In my personal military experience I cannot say that being a female negatively impacted my experience in any way." Women veterans also reported that they had opportunities to take on leadership roles and address needs that their male peers were unable to fill:

“During my military experience, there were periods where I served as the only female enlisted noncommissioned officer charged with duties related to other female veterans that the command felt I was best suited for as oppose to a male soldier. I was specifically pulled from rank and file, which made me feel respected and valued. These assignments helped me to excel through the ranks as well as resume positions of greater responsibility over both male and female subordinates, culminating my career as a First Sergeant.”

Despite these positive aspects of some respondents’ service, harassment, discrimination, and in some cases sexual assault deeply impacted other women veterans’ time in the military:

“I felt like [being a woman] really didn’t matter. Later, I learned that it made me a target. I was harassed pretty regularly, told I was promoted only because I was a “chick”, and raped by my team chief. I wouldn’t want my daughter to join.”

“Hardly a year into my time of service, I was sexually assaulted by another Marine... After that point, I was removed from the unit and scolded for destroying HIS reputation. I came across his name time and time again in conversations about the incident and I was afraid to reveal myself as the person who reported it, but the comments defending him demoralized me.”

“It was a sad reality of my time in the service. Furthermore, when I was sexually assaulted by a shipmate, he was never brought to court martial and he ended up getting promoted while I was forced to change departments and ending up facing a DRB on bogus charges (they brought my sexual assault up at the DRB), because his buddy was in my chain of command.”

These veterans’ responses paint a complex picture of women in the military in the post-9/11 era. Some women gained leadership skills, increased confidence and pride as a result of their service, many others encountered harassment, discrimination, marginalization, and still others experienced traumatic events including sexual assault. Overall, 42% of respondents did not feel respected or valued as service members, 72% felt they had fewer opportunities than their male peers, and more than 50% of survey participants described harassment, discrimination, marginalization or sexual assault in their open-ended responses. While these experiences cannot be taken as representative of all women veterans in the post-9/11 generation, they do indicate serious issues within the military that can affect women veterans during and after their service in uniform.

SURVEY RESULTS – REINTEGRATION INTO CIVILIAN LIFE

Survey participants left the military for a variety of reasons, with the most common being medical discharge (29%), a desire of focus on family (19%), retirement (13%) and frustration with their career progress (11%). Other reasons included the desire to pursue higher education, experiencing sexual assault, and being unable to meet military physical fitness standards. Respondents reported a significantly higher rate of difficulty reintegrating into civilian life compared with the overall post-9/11 veteran population. While 44% of post-9/11 veterans report that their readjustment is somewhat or very difficult, 82% of survey respondents reported that their readjustment was difficult.^{xviii} 38% of respondents reported that their readjustment was very difficult, compared with 19% of post-9/11 veterans overall.

Respondents reported many common reintegration issues, including struggling to find a job, strained family relationships and psychological health consequences of traumatic military experiences. Their responses also shed light on the unique issues facing women veterans during reintegration. Respondents overwhelmingly reported that they felt overlooked and were often not recognized as veterans at all – even by military officials and veteran service organizations.

Just 13 respondents (19%) reported feeling comfortable within civilian culture, and only 26 (37%) reported that they felt respected and valued as veterans. This theme continued in responses to open-ended questions, with 24% of respondents reporting that not being recognized as a veteran affected their reintegration. One veteran wrote that, “[Being a woman] made [reintegration] harder, many do not view you as highly as a female veteran or make comments that you’re not a real veteran and ‘didn’t have to do what the boys did.’” Another wrote:

“I think women veterans are invisible. When people talk about veterans in my community, they see the face of a man. Women veterans tend to not get the support that will help them with their integration, especially, younger women veterans.”

An additional 67% of respondents reported that not being recognized for their service affected their identity as veterans. These respondents overwhelmingly felt that women veterans are easily dismissed, assumed to be military spouses and assumed to be noncombatants. One veteran articulated all of these issues in her response:

“Being a woman hugely affects my identity as a veteran. It’s a regular thing to be told I’m too pretty to have served in the military, let alone at war. I’ve been told I couldn’t possibly have any issues relating to war since I was a female and couldn’t possibly have experienced anything but rainbows and sunshine while deployed. I’ve been called a liar. I’m always being told what a wonderful spouse I am to be attending all these VA appointments with my husband-the veteran. It’s rude, annoying and disrespectful.”

Responses describing being treated as a military spouse were common. One respondent said, “Most people assume I’m a spouse or dependent. They judge before they ask. So I feel as if being a veteran doesn’t mean anything because I feel that woman veterans doesn’t get looked at the same as men veterans.”

This sense of alienation may be exacerbated by another trend in open-ended responses – women veterans feel that systems and services for veterans are not accommodating their needs effectively. As

one veteran put it:

“Women warriors are treated as second class veterans. We are the after thought. We are seen as the ‘wife of’ ‘sister of’ ‘girlfriend of’ but not the veteran. We are not honored or recognized by the agencies, organizations and institutions that claim to support veterans.”

These issues carried forward to the Department of Veterans Affairs, which respondents described as failing to recognize the combat experiences of women veterans:

“...the VA seems to be oblivious to that fact that women have served in hazardous duty zones that put women in contact and they should be treated appropriately regardless of the DoD classifications.”

Women veterans’ perception of exclusion dissuaded some of them from pursuing veteran-focused services:

“When I went through a hard time and sought out veteran programs, I noticed that many programs were geared towards male veterans and very little or any programs were for female veterans or female veterans with children.”

“When I went to the VA I wasn’t treated the same. I was always called ‘Mr.’ or asked where my husband was. It made me not want to seek help.”

Respondents also reported that it was difficult to form strong social relationships during their reintegration, with 30% reporting they connected with civilians, 36% reporting they connected with other female veterans and 44% reporting they connected with male veterans.

Continuing a trend that emerged in respondents’ reflections on their military experiences, a few veterans reported that being a woman had no effect on their reintegration or identity as a veteran. One stated straightforwardly, “I can’t say that being a woman has affected my reintegration any differently than my male counterparts. I feel reintegration can be as equally tough for both sexes.” Another veteran agreed, writing that, “I feel that in the civilian life, everyone whether you are a man or woman, life is equally challenging when it comes to reintegration.”

Respondents were clearly proud of their service and their identity as veterans. One veteran expressed this sentiment, writing, “Many times woman veterans are not considered when people think of veterans. I am proud of my and other women’s contributions to the military and I believe we have helped shape it.” Others expressed that they are proud of the example they set for other women during and after their service. One such veteran wrote:

“I believe that I am seen as a role model and appreciated for accomplishing what I did in the military. I also feel that my story and experiences are opening a lot of eyes to the fact that women have seen and done things that men have done.”

SURVEY RESULTS – WOMEN AND THE MISSION CONTINUES

The Mission Continues offers two programs that engage veterans in structured volunteer service designed to support their successful reintegration into their communities. Veterans who participate in The Mission Continues service platoons engage in monthly or bi-monthly team-based service and social events designed to build sense of purpose, camaraderie and social support. The fellowship program offers a more intensive service experience, adding a requirement of 20 hours per week of service at a nonprofit organization, a living stipend, a dedicated peer mentor and a professional development curriculum designed to help participants reach professional and educational goals.

Both programs have been successful in attracting high percentages of female veterans. 31% of the veterans and service members who participate in service platoons are women, as are 34% of veterans who participate in the fellowship program. These women mirror the overall population of Post-9/11 women veterans – they are more likely to be members of a minority group and they have a higher unemployment rate than their male peers. They report a higher occurrence of mental health issues than average; 40% of women in the service platoons screen positive for PTSD, and more than 50% report they are in treatment for depression or anxiety.

Researchers from the Center for Social Development at Washington University evaluated the fellowship program in 2012 and 2014. Their data revealed that women veterans participating in the program experienced significant professional development and built deeper connections with their communities. Women veterans reported that the program helped them to transfer military skills to civilian employment (71%), further their education (73%), obtain employment (65%), build networking opportunities for a future career path (93%), sustain a role of service to their community (92%) and become a leader in their community (91%). After the program, 98% of these women veterans reported having a strong attachment to their communities, 96% felt they had the ability to make a difference in their community and 97% actively tried to find the time or a way to make a difference. 98% would recommend the program to another woman veteran (N=192).

Beyond the measurable reintegration impact of the program, our survey found that continued service might help women veterans overcome the social and cultural challenges they can face during reintegration. When asked about their experience with The Mission Continues:

- 94% reported that they felt comfortable and included within The Mission Continues culture (compared with 19% in civilian culture).
- 90% reported that they felt respected and valued as a veteran (compared with 38% in civilian culture).
- 69% of respondents reported forming strong social bonds with male veterans, comparable with the 70% who reported forming strong bonds with male peers in the military.
- 72% reported strong social bonds with other woman veterans, again comparable with 70% who reported social connections with female peers during their military service.
- Finally, 72% of respondents reported that they formed bonds with civilians through The Mission Continues, compared with 30% who said the same about their reintegration into civilian culture.

Open-ended responses reinforced themes of camaraderie, recognition and pride. One woman cited the role of The Mission Continues in helping her connect with other women veterans. She wrote, “Women are generally overlooked as veterans. Males seem to connect faster and it can be a challenge to find other female veterans. The Mission Continues was probably the only time I really connected with female veterans and we still stay in touch.”

Another veteran contrasted the lack of recognition she experienced during reintegration with her experience participating in recently established veterans organizations:

"I feel ignored, dismissed, disenfranchised everywhere. There is no childcare in any VA facilities, everywhere I look it's all about male vets. Even the junk mail about VA loans comes addressed to my husband who is a civilian. But I am proud to be a vet, I wear my colors proudly. And the post 9/11 Vet community is different. Women are welcome and a big part of new veterans orgs like MC [The Mission Continues], TRWB [Team Red, White and Blue], TR [Team Rubicon] are welcoming."

Veterans reinforced their positive experiences with the program, specifically highlighting a sense of equality between male and female veterans serving together:

"The Mission Continues, in my opinion, does a great job of supporting and empowering women veterans by doing what they are doing right now. Opportunities are available to everyone and there is a clear respect for all veterans regardless if they are male or female."

"I've met and maintained more relationships with more women veterans in the last 8 months than I did in the 11 plus years post service. This is nothing The Mission Continues advertises or promises, but I think it's a special benefit that happens because we know that when we show up at orientation(s) that we can see each other without uniform, or rank, and we find out how similar our experiences are, how we can support one another, and how we can grow professionally with each other."

"I think [The Mission Continues is] right on track and this is a great organization. Many people still aren't aware of this awesome opportunity and I tell about it are[sic] very interested. Most of the people involved are younger and normally won't be part of the VFW or older organizations but this appeals to all. I'm hooked for life."

Finally, respondents shared their views on what the country needs to know about women veterans. Their responses centered on the need to recognize women veterans for their service overseas, their value to their communities and their role as ambassadors for women in the military:

"The country needs to know that we have been serving in "roles in combat" for far longer than they think. My generation stands on the shoulders of women and men who came before us, who received little to no recognition or gratitude. We are stronger because of the experiences we have had and the choices we make toward healing and building resilience."

“We sacrifice much when we serve our country in a contingency environment, remote tours or any other extended separations away from loved ones. We also sacrifice beginning new relationships or continuing relationships or starting a family due to our commitment to serve. We can be strong, positive contributors to our communities.”

“[The country needs to know that] we exist. That our service and our reintegration can be more challenging than our male counterparts based solely on our gender. That we are doing more to advance the feminist cause than is being recognized. That we are valuable to our communities as leaders. That we are still women.”

CONCLUSION

The military ended the Combat Exclusion Policy in 2013, ensuring the next generation of women warriors will serve on more equal footing with their male counterparts. If the findings of this survey are any indication, we must take steps at the community level to ensure women reintegrate on equal footing as well. The Mission Continues and other modern veteran services organizations like Team Red, White and Blue, Team Rubicon and the Wounded Warrior Project can support women veterans' reintegration through their programs, but the nonprofit sector can only reach a subset of the population. More broadly, the American public must show greater recognition and respect to women veterans. This can only happen with greater understanding the vital work that women veterans accomplish in their communities.

More research is needed to determine the depth and breadth of the social and cultural issues that women confront during their military service and reintegration. At the very least, policy makers and veteran services leaders should consider these factors when creating strategies to support the fastest growing segment of the veteran population. As hundreds of thousands of women veterans reintegrate into their communities over the next decade, government agencies, businesses and nonprofit organizations have a unique opportunity to serve, hire and engage them. These stakeholders must seize this opportunity with an awareness of the many ways in which women veterans are similar to their male peers, and the important ways in which they are not.

The Mission Continues programs attract women veterans who want to serve their communities and showcase their skills in a positive setting. In addition to making an impact on their communities, these veterans are performing another type of public service – raising awareness of the value of women veterans at the community level. The significant number of women veterans who pursue continued service through The Mission Continues might be an indicator of the importance of this work. Certainly, the women who responded to survey felt that greater awareness of their service, sacrifice and potential was a worthy goal that they advanced through their service here at home.

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