

Exploring the needs of female veteran members of the WRAC Association: A collaboration between Combat Stress and the WRAC Association

Background and Aims

Women form a minority within the UK military, with about 10.8% percent of UK veterans in 2006 being female. This is expected to rise to about 13% by 2028. Most research has focused primarily on male veterans and only a few studies look specifically at the needs of female veterans. Clearly, there is a need to understand the specific challenges and needs of female veterans to ensure that services are best suited to offer support. This study was therefore conducted to investigate the unique barriers female veterans face during and after military service, the physical and psychological wellbeing of female veterans, and the impact of key sociodemographic factors and barriers on female veteran wellbeing.

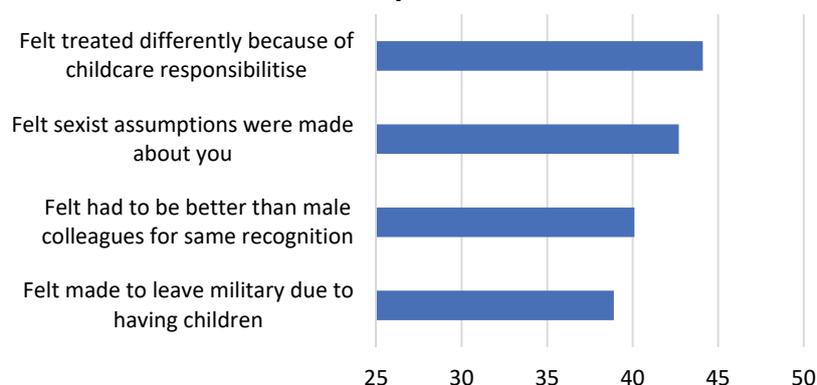
Study method

1680 UK female members of the Women's Royal Army Corps (WRAC) Association were emailed a link to an online survey between August and October 2020, of which 44.6% (750) completed the survey. Participants provided sociodemographic information (e.g., age, relationship status, employment status), information of adverse childhood experiences, and information about their military experience (e.g., rank at time of discharge, length of service, adversity exposure during service). Participants also completed questionnaires assessing physical health symptoms, social support, and feelings of loneliness, as well as mental health questionnaires assessing alcohol use, anger difficulties, common mental health difficulties (CMD's) (i.e., anxiety and depression), and post-traumatic stress (PTSD) difficulties.

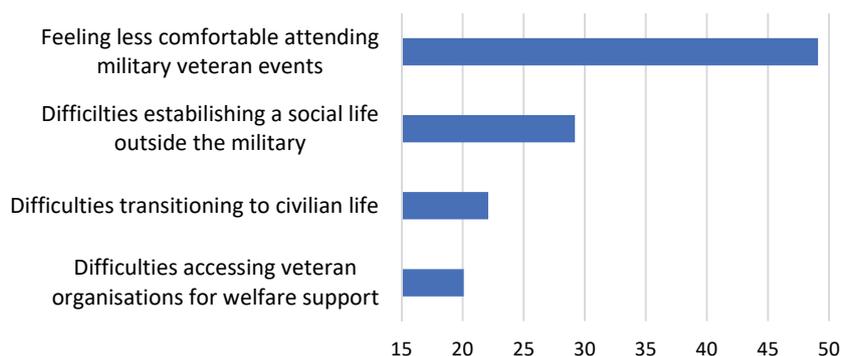
Study findings

The majority of the sample were aged 51-70, were retired and were currently in a heterosexual relationship. Regarding military experiences, most reported having served for more than four years, having left service voluntarily, and having their first child after leaving. Many reported experiencing challenges during and after military service. Challenges during service appeared to relate to being a woman within a male-dominant setting, such as feeling treated differently because of childcare duties and feeling that they had to be better than male colleagues to receive the same recognition. Two of the most common challenges after leaving the military were feeling uncomfortable attending veteran events and finding it difficult to establish a social life outside of the military.

Most commonly endorsed challenges during military service

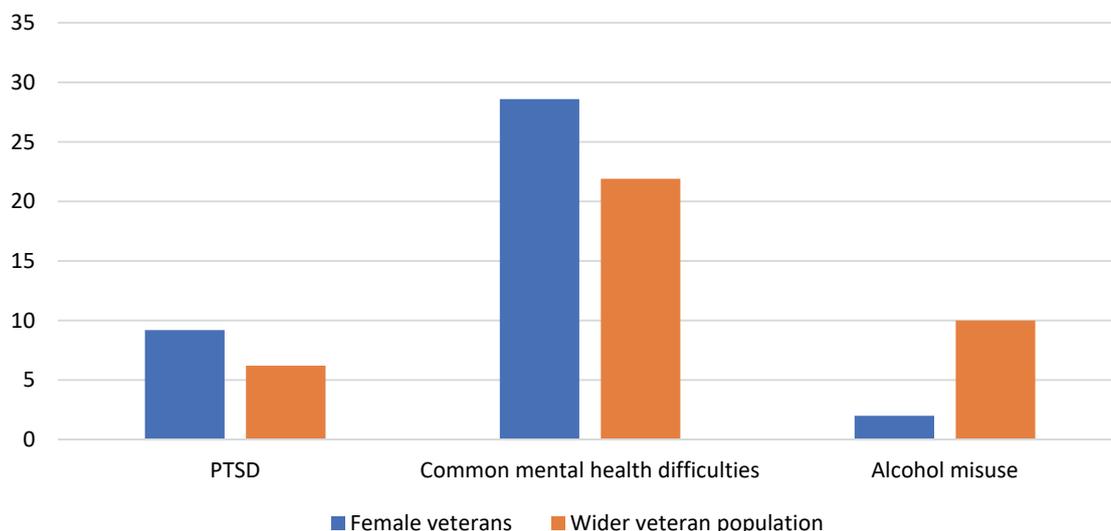


Most commonly endorsed challenges after military service



In general, there were high levels of CMD's (28.6%) and PTSD (9.2%) within the sample and appear to be higher than the general veteran population and the public. Difficulties with alcohol use was low (2.0%) and appear to be lower than both the general veteran cohort and the public. The sample also reported high levels of loneliness (39.3%).

Percentage of female veterans meeting probable diagnosis of PTSD, CMD's and alcohol misuse, compared to wider veteran population



Note: Prevalence rates of PTSD, CMD's and alcohol misuse in the wider veteran population can be found in Stevelink et al, (2018) 'Mental health outcomes at the end of the British involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts: A cohort study'.

Women who were older than 50, were a 'non-commissioned officer' or 'other rank' when they left the military, and if they experienced more challenges during military service were at greater risk of CMD's and PTSD. Women who experienced more challenges during military service were also more likely to experience physical health difficulties. Those who experienced more challenges after military service were more likely to experience difficulties with loneliness. Finally, women who faced greater military adversity, greater childhood adversity, and who had difficulties with physical health, low social support, and loneliness were at a greater risk of CMD's and PTSD.

Implications

The findings of the present study are vital in enhancing our understanding of the specific needs and challenges female veterans face, which can promote adequate adjustment of available support to meet female veterans' needs. For example, a potential avenue may be to directly address the challenges and barriers that female veterans face after leaving the military to reduce feelings of loneliness and help promote mental wellbeing.

Next Steps

The team are currently in the process of exploring this data in further detail and aim to start formally publishing findings during 2021.