



ATW HEALTH SOLUTIONS

**White Paper:
Women Veteran Mental Health**

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Women Veteran Mental Health

The Need for Equity and Education

Executive summary: Veteran mental health is often overlooked due to a lack of education, underdeveloped outreach, and the culture surrounding behavioral health. Women veterans and women service members face unique barriers, adding to the disparities in mental health treatment. Moreover, socioeconomic factors and social norms feed into the attitudes and approaches toward veteran mental health. Therefore, it is imperative to implement education and reform policies to create a healthier tomorrow for our veteran population.

Key Takeaways

- Mental health in the military is a taboo topic and is met with resistance towards seeking help and treatment.
- Women veterans face different obstacles as opposed to their male counterparts, contributing to mental health concerns.
- Education, outreach, and policy reform are crucial in fighting the stigma surrounding mental health and addressing these concerns.

The Problem/Opportunity

Women have played an integral role in the military throughout history, yet their unique experiences and challenges as veterans have often been overlooked. From the Vietnam War to present-day conflicts, the number of women serving in the military has steadily increased (Kang et al., 2015). Despite these increasing numbers, women veterans continue to face numerous mental health challenges that require attention and support. Compared to their non-veteran counterparts and male veterans, women veterans are more likely to suffer from mental health conditions and comorbid chronic medical conditions (Kimerling et al., 2015). These mental health conditions are often a result of the stressful and traumatic events that women veterans experience during their military service. As of 2019, past studies have shown that one-quarter of women veterans report sexual trauma during their time in the military (Horrom, 2019). Most women in the military have experienced sexual harassment or repeated sexual harassment. Military sexual trauma (MST) is associated with high rates of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and substance abuse. Additionally, women face gender discrimination and isolation, further contributing to the strain on mental health. If this population is overlooked, the rates of mood disorders and other mental health concerns will continue to increase.

The History/Background

The lack of mental health programs specifically tailored to women veterans is a longstanding issue that has roots in historical and societal factors. Throughout history, women's experiences in the military have often been overshadowed or neglected. Their roles have traditionally been confined to support positions, and their contributions to combat efforts have often gone unrecognized. As a result, mental health programs and services have primarily focused on the needs of male veterans, neglecting the unique challenges and trauma that women face during their military service (Larson et al., 2012). This neglect can be attributed to several milestones and developments. Firstly, the historical exclusion of women from combat roles in the military meant that their experiences of trauma were often overlooked or downplayed. Additionally, societal norms and gender biases have perpetuated the idea that mental health issues are primarily a male concern, further marginalizing women veterans' mental health needs. Today, the lack of mental health programs for women veterans remains a pressing issue. Despite some progress in recent years, the utilization of mental health services by women veterans remains significantly lower compared to their male counterparts. This can be attributed to several factors, including the reluctance of some women to seek help due to stigma or fear of being perceived as weak. Furthermore, the limited availability of women-specific services and a lack of familiarity among clinicians with the unique experiences of women veterans contribute to the barriers to accessing adequate mental health care. As a result, women veterans continue to face challenges in receiving the appropriate mental health support they need. Several factors may account for the lack of progress to date in studying trauma in women veterans: These include the reluctance of some women to report traumatic events, clinicians' resistance to inquire about them, limitations in existing mental health resources, and a legal-societal context that is often unsympathetic to the needs of victims and survivors in general (Wolfe et al., 1994). Furthermore, the historical and societal context has contributed to the lack of mental health programs for women veterans. In addition, the unique challenges and experiences faced by women veterans have not been adequately recognized or addressed within the existing mental health system. Currently, efforts are being made to address the lack of mental health programs for women veterans.

The Proposed Solution(s)

To address the mental health crisis for female veterans, several solutions can be implemented. First, there should be increased awareness and availability of community services specifically tailored to the post-deployment issues faced by women veterans (Bastian et al., 2013). This can include specialized counseling services that not only address mental health conditions but also consider the unique challenges and experiences of female veterans. Secondly, it is crucial to improve the accessibility and utilization of VA services for women veterans. This can be achieved by ensuring that women's health clinics are available in VA facilities and that there is enough female physicians and mental health professionals to meet the needs of female veterans (Fox et al., 2015). Lastly, implementing telehealth programs can significantly improve access to mental health care for female veterans.

Telehealth

Moreover, healthcare providers can utilize telehealth capabilities to provide remote counseling and therapy sessions for female veterans, particularly those in rural areas or with limited transportation options. These telehealth programs can also help overcome barriers such as stigma or privacy concerns that may prevent some female veterans from seeking traditional in-person treatment. Additionally, female veterans can have virtual appointments from the comfort of their own homes. To further support female veterans' mental health, there should be an emphasis on peer support and social connection. This can be facilitated by establishing support groups and mentorship programs specifically for female veterans, where they can share their experiences and receive emotional support from others who have had similar experiences. To enhance the mental health services for female veterans, it is essential to improve the integration of technology into their treatment plans. This can involve creating online mental health resources that are easily accessible and free of charge, providing evidence-based treatment options for various mental health conditions commonly experienced by female veterans. Furthermore, crisis helplines staffed by mental health professionals with knowledge of military veteran suicide risk factors should be established specifically for female veterans (Levine & Sher, 2021). To address the mental health crisis for female veterans, it is essential to enhance cultural competency within mental health services.

Integration

This can be achieved by providing training and education for mental health professionals on the unique experiences and challenges faced by female veterans, including issues related to military sexual trauma, gender-specific mental health conditions, and the impact of military service on women. To address the mental health crisis for female veterans, it is crucial to improve coordination and collaboration between the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and non-governmental organizations that specialize in providing mental health services to women. By partnering with these organizations, the VA can expand its reach and ensure that female veterans have access to a wide range of mental health support options that are tailored to their specific needs. To address the mental health crisis for female veterans, it is crucial to prioritize research and data collection on their unique mental health needs. This will help to inform the development of targeted interventions and treatment approaches for female veterans. Improving coordination and collaboration between different sectors and agencies involved in providing mental health services is crucial. This can include strengthening partnerships between the VA, Department of Defense, community mental health organizations, and nonprofit organizations that specialize in serving female veterans. By working together and sharing resources, these entities can ensure that female veterans have a seamless continuum of care and receive the comprehensive support they need.

Trauma Informed Care

To address the mental health crisis for female veterans, it is essential to increase awareness and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health. This can be achieved through targeted education and awareness campaigns that specifically focus on the unique mental health challenges faced by female veterans. It is essential to train healthcare professionals, both within the VA and in the community, on female veterans' specific needs and experiences. Additionally, implementing trauma-informed care practices within the VA and other healthcare settings can significantly benefit female veterans. By incorporating trauma-informed care principles into mental health services, healthcare providers can create a safe and supportive environment for female veterans that honors their experiences and promotes healing and recovery. To address the mental health crisis for female veterans, it is crucial to improve access to culturally competent and gender-sensitive mental health care. This can involve ensuring that mental health providers have the necessary training and knowledge to understand and address the unique needs of female veterans.

Furthermore, it is vital to enhance the availability and accessibility of evidence-based treatment options for mental health conditions commonly experienced by female veterans. These may include therapies like cognitive-behavioral therapy and trauma-focused therapy, and medication management for those who require it. To address the mental health crisis for female veterans, it is essential to establish specialized mental health programs and facilities catering specifically to their needs. These programs and facilities can provide comprehensive mental health services tailored to the unique experiences and challenges of female veterans. By creating women-only healthcare settings, female veterans can feel more comfortable seeking mental health care and may be more willing to disclose their experiences and seek treatment. Also, the systemic barriers and biases that prevent them from accessing appropriate care must be addressed, and recommendations are listed below.

The Recommendations/Action Items

Increase Access to Mental Health Services

- Increase funding for mental health services specifically targeted towards female veterans.
- Provide patient education and social media awareness for support groups for female veterans.

Gener-Specific Services

- Research and develop methods for gender-specific mental health services.

- Implement women-only therapy groups, trauma-informed care, and programs addressing issues such as military sexual trauma and women's healthcare needs.

Ensure Sufficient Female Healthcare Providers

- Increase the recruitment and retention of female healthcare providers within the VA healthcare system (Adams et al., 2021).
- Offer incentives such as loan repayment programs and scholarships for female healthcare providers interested in working with female veterans.

Expand Telehealth Services

- Increase availability and accessibility of telehealth services for mental healthcare, allowing female veterans to receive care from their own homes.
- Partner with federal and state governments to subsidize broadband infrastructure to ensure veterans in rural or austere communities can continue to receive support.

The Call-To-Action/Conclusion

In conclusion, female veterans face a heightened risk of mental health issues, stemming not only from the unique challenges and traumatic experiences they often encounter in military service but also from existing barriers to seeking effective mental health care. Solutions such as hiring more female healthcare providers and gender-informed training for all providers can create an environment where these veterans feel seen, heard, and adequately treated. Addressing social stigmas and providing gender-specific healthcare settings are also essential steps towards creating an inclusive and adequate mental healthcare system. These efforts are vital to not only improving the mental health outcomes of female veterans but also to recognizing and honoring their service to their country. We must act now for a healthier tomorrow.

About The Author: Sofia Gutierrez has served as a medic for over six years in the U.S. Army. Her experience ranges from battlefield medicine, emergency medicine, and behavioral health. She earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from Southern New Hampshire University in 2023. She is currently enrolled at Georgetown University, earning her master's in project management. Her long-term goals are to implement her military experience and education to battle the stigma surrounding seeking mental health help in the military and address the health disparities found within the veteran communities.

About the Organization ATW Health Solutions is a social impact and advisory consulting firm based in Chicago, Illinois. ATW Health Solutions is a U.S. Small Business Administration-certified women-owned small business (WOSB) and 8(a) program participant. ATW Health Solutions has earned national recognition for its work transforming healthcare delivery systems, impacting policy, and improving quality and safety. With a focus on quality, safety, and health equity, we have partnered with public and private organizations and government agencies to transform systems locally and nationally. Founded by healthcare transformation expert and visionary Dr. Knitasha Washington, ATW Health Solutions is an innovative, value-driven organization committed to improving healthcare for all. We apply an evidence-based approach, embedding data and analytics into performance measurement. Our client solutions seamlessly integrate patient-centeredness and equity as core strategies—resulting in demonstrated value.

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