Women & Trauma: Nationwide Study Puts New Focus on the Effects of Combat

Scientists studying how trauma affects the health of women and girls have long focused on domestic or intimate partner violence and childhood abuse. Trauma in men generally has been studied among emergency responders such as police and firefighters, and in relation to the experience of combat in war.

Today, however, substantial numbers of American women are military veterans who are returning home with combat experience, thus broadening the scope of traumatic experiences for women.

Our center’s Research Core on Women and Trauma is at the forefront of this evolving research focus. Women’s Health Research at Yale is a key partner with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) on a collaborative, nationwide study – one of the first empirical investigations of its kind – to determine whether there are gender differences in how female and male combat veterans readjust to civilian life.

“In the past decade we’ve seen the largest number of women combat veterans ever,” said Dr. Rani Hoff, the study’s Principal Investigator and Director of our Research Core on Women and Trauma. “This is the first opportunity we’ve had to really understand the effects of combat on women, and gender differences that might or might not exist.”

This observational study is called the Survey of Experiences of Returning Veterans or SERV Study. It was designed in response to the unprecedented number of American military women who were exposed to and engaged in combat in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and concern that women are more susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than men, given similar experiences.

Women’s Health Research at Yale Director Dr. Carolyn M. Mazure, and Dr. Sherry McKee, Associate Professor of Psychiatry, are Co-Investigators on the Study. Hoff, Ph.D., M.P.H., is Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Yale School of Medicine and Director of the Northeast Program Evaluation Center in West Haven, CT, which evaluates VA mental health services nationwide.

Historically, the VA patient population has been overwhelmingly male and studying gender differences has not been a priority. However, Hoff sees signs of change, as the readjustment experiences of women veterans and the importance of the study have gained the attention of VA leaders.

The changing makeup of the armed forces is driving this evolution. Since 1973, when conscription ended
and an all-volunteer force was established, the number of women serving on active duty has risen dramatically—from about 42,000 to 167,000, according to a Pew Research Center report last December that relied on U.S. Department of Defense data. The share of women in the enlisted ranks has increased from 2% to 14%, and the share of commissioned officers has quadrupled from 4% to 16%, according to the report.

In addition, changes in military policies and a decade-long war have contributed to increases in combat exposure for women. Before 1990, only 7% of female veterans had been exposed to combat, compared to 24% of female veterans after 1990, the Pew report says.

Although U.S. Department of Defense policy restricts women from serving in units in which the primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground, the irregular nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the often close proximity between support and combat units meant that more women than ever before found themselves in combat. Women in the armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan sometimes had to engage in combat, for example, when their units came under attack. The Army and the Marines utilized women to search Iraqi women for weapons and to patrol with foot soldiers. In Afghanistan, women have served in female engagement teams to help units deal with female villagers, according to a Congressional Research Service report issued in April 2012.

Of the approximately 2.4 million Americans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan in the past 10 years, more than 283,000 have been women, and both the Defense Department and veterans advocates recognize that an unprecedented number of women have been exposed to combat. Hundreds of Army women have received the Combat Action Badge. Of the 6,604 service members who have died as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, 144 have been women, (as of Veterans Day, 2012), according to the Washington Post. Nearly 900 women have been wounded in the two wars, according to the congressional report.

Two concerns make the SERV study a high priority for society and science, according to Hoff. The first is that, given the same exposure to any type of trauma, women are more likely than men to develop PTSD. The second is that, compared to men, women enter the military having had more trauma as civilians, and may suffer trauma, including sexual assault, at the hands of their comrades more than men. Thus, women exposed to combat have a higher chance than their male counterparts of having to deal with what Hoff refers to as “compound trauma.”

“If there are differences in how combat affects women and men who are readjusting when they come home, my guess is it’s more likely due to the compound trauma problem,” she said. But it is still much too early in the study for answers, Hoff said.

The SERV study goal is to have at least 1,200 women and men as participants. Recruitment for the study is well under way as more than 250 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have agreed to participate and surveys have begun, she said.

The survey consists of five telephone interviews over one year, and participants have the option of

A series of SERV Study recruitment videos can be viewed on YouTube.
remaining in the survey for several more years for follow-up questionnaires.

Enrolling veterans of these two wars presents particular challenges, according to Hoff, herself a veteran who served as an Army field medic, including a stint in Germany toward the end of the Cold War. Compared to previous generations, veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are more likely to move from where they lived before service or overseas deployment. In addition, they appear to be less interested in participating than older veterans in health projects like the SERV study and veterans organizations that could serve as focal points for information on the study, Hoff said.

“They’re very mobile,” she said. “Some are looking for employment opportunities, and so they are moving around a lot.”

To appeal to this generation of veterans, the SERV study is using recruitment videos on YouTube. Facebook advertisements began this year on Veterans Day, Hoff said. A study newsletter is sent to participants and is available online.

A practical benefit that Hoff foresees from this study is a restructuring of the VA’s services to deal with the changing veteran populations and potentially differing needs of women and men combat veterans.

While it is too early to speculate on what the study will find, she is sure of one thing. “If the study does show differences, my worst nightmare would be for someone to use the results to say women shouldn’t serve in the military. I wouldn’t want to see that,” Hoff said.

“It’s really a matter of figuring out who (man or woman) is vulnerable to poor health and readjustment outcomes, and what personal characteristics make someone (man or woman) resilient in the face of trauma.”

More information on the SERV Study is available online at: http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn1/serv/
or by calling (203) 932-5711 ext. 3730

A SERV Study recruitment video can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUvYfe9Gts