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Women Veterans Face Unique Obstacles, Needs

SUMMARY

Women make up about 14 percent of the U.S. military and now serve in more combat situations than in past wars. As part of our NewsHour Connect series, Scott Shafer of KQED in San Francisco met with female veterans about the particular challenges women face after their military service and what support is available.

Transcript

*This segment was originally produced for **KQED-TV**. You can watch the full version [here](#).*

JIM LEHRER: For those stations not taking a pledge break, the NewsHour continues with the challenges female veterans face after returning from war. It's part of our series NewsHour Connect, which showcases public media reporting from around the nation.

Tonight's story comes from Scott Schafer of KQED San Francisco.

SCOTT SCHAFFER: Star Lara grew up in Roswell, New Mexico, and was on her way to managing a fast food restaurant. But a conversation with a friend changed all that.

STAR LARA, former soldier: And he goes, "You know what I just did?" "What?" He was, like, "I just joined the Army. Do you want to join?" "All right."

And that's how I ended up in the Army for 12 years.

SCOTT SCHAFFER: Star joined the Army in 1995 and eventually ended up in Iraq. She's one of almost 200,000 women veterans in California.

STAR LARA: It fit my personality. It fit my drive. It fit my enthusiasm. It gave me so many opportunities that I could never have achieved anywhere else. It just -- the lady was that perfect fit for me.

SCOTT SCHAFFER: But with all the opportunities the military offered, it didn't necessarily prepare Star, or other women veterans, for the aftermath.

STAR LARA: You came from being very independent to somehow emotionally co-dependent on those that are around you for that -- that support. You become distracted from things that are happening back at home. It's difficult to maintain relationships with loved ones in the United States or anywhere else.

SCOTT SCHAFFER: When she was in Iraq, Star went from speaking to her mother once a week to not calling her for eight months. And while isolation from family and friends is something all service members deal with, Star says there's something different in the way women handle the experience of war.

STAR LARA: I think that men and women process information differently and we suppress information differently. Women suppress it immediately, but because of needing to find a way back to normalcy.

SCOTT SCHAFFER: Men and women also have significantly different needs after they're discharged from the military, especially when it comes to child care and mental health.

Caitlin Hasser is a psychiatrist at the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Center and the director of the Women's Mental Health Clinic.

DR. CAITLIN HASSER, psychiatrist, Women's Mental Health Clinic, San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Center: We know women veterans have higher rates of single parenthood than male veterans and there are higher rates of homelessness and -- and then also a lot of different societal roles. The average woman veteran I see is usually juggling about 50 things. And her own needs are often not at the top of that priority list.

SCOTT SCHAFFER: Women make up about 14 percent of all service members, but they are at greater risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, than their male counterparts.

DR. CAITLIN HASSER: One of the -- the traumas with the highest rate for developing PTSD is sexual trauma. And women have much higher rates of exposure to sexual trauma, and, therefore, in part, have higher rates of developing PTSD.

SCOTT SCHAFFER: The Department of Veterans Affairs says nearly a quarter of women veterans have reported sexual assault by their peers while in the military. The Pentagon reports a 25 percent increase in military sexual trauma among women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, things like sexual assault and harassment.

And yet, despite these increasing numbers, most of these cases still go unreported.

DIANE WILLIAMSON, former soldier: Even after all these years, I still find it hard to believe that it -- that it hap -- it happened, because I'm such a different person now.

SCOTT SCHAFFER: Diane Williamson served in the Army from 1976 to 1979. She says her commanding officer raped her in front of her 6-month-old daughter.

DIANE WILLIAMSON: I -- I just think it was one of the classic cases of him taking advantage of his position and me not knowing or learning the ways of how the Army is as far as in relationship to women.

And so after it happened and I left the service, not a whole lot of people knew about it. I just -- and I never told my family. So self-esteem was like shot.

SCOTT SCHAFFER: Like many women veterans, Diane suppressed her experience for almost 30 years. She didn't know how to deal with the rape or what her rights were, especially within the confines of the military.

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