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For women in military, an elevated divorce rate

By Kimberly Hefling

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Two failed marriages were the cost of war for Sgt. Jennifer Schobey.

The breaking point in her first marriage came when her husband deployed to Afghanistan, the last in a long line of separations they had endured as they juggled two military careers. Schobey married another combat veteran, but eventually that union failed under the weight of two cases of post-traumatic stress disorder - his and hers. They are now getting divorced.

Separations. Injuries. Mental health issues. All are added weights to the normal strains of marriage.

For women in the military, there's a cold, hard reality: Their marriages are more than twice as likely to end in divorce as those of their male comrades - and up to three times as likely for enlisted women.

About 220,000 women have served in Afghanistan and Iraq in roles ranging from helicopter pilots to police officers. Last year, 7.8 percent of women in the military got a divorce, compared with 3 percent of military men, according to Pentagon statistics. Among the military's enlisted corps, meaning they aren't commissioned officers, nearly 9 percent of women saw their marriages end, compared with a little more than 3 percent of the men.

Research indicates that military women also get divorced at higher rates than their peers outside the military, while military men divorce at lower rates than their peers, according to a journal article published last year by Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and the Brookings Institution. Directly comparing divorce rates between the military and civilian sectors is difficult because of the way the numbers are kept. It also noted that older military women - ages 40 to 49 - are about half as likely to be in their first marriage as civilian women of the same age.

The percentage of military women getting a divorce has been consistently higher for at least a decade.

Like all divorces, the results can be a sense of loss and a financial blow. But for military women, a divorce can be a breaking point - even putting them at greater risk for homelessness down the road.

It has an effect, too, on military children. The military has more single moms than dads, and an estimated 30,000 of them have deployed in support of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Why military women are more burdened by divorce is unclear, although societal pressure is probably a factor.

"It's a strange situation, where there's a fair amount of equality in terms of their military roles, but as the military increasingly treats women the same as it treats men in terms of their work expectations, however, society still expects them to fulfill their family roles. And that's not equally balanced between men and women," said David Segal, director of the Center for Research on Military Organization at the University of Maryland.

One speculation is that while more traditional men join the military, women who are attracted to military life are less conventional - and perhaps less willing to stay in a bad marriage.

About half of all married women in the military are married to a fellow service member, compared with less than 10 percent of military men. While it can be an advantage to be married to someone who understands military life, balancing two military careers poses challenges.

Former Army Sgt. Daniela Gibson, an Afghan war veteran, knows that firsthand. Gibson, 24, spent more than four years apart from her military husband and thousands of dollars on long-distance phone calls as they each did war deployments, training and moves. She said it's tough to not feel insecure about your own marriage as you watch others falling apart around you and see fellow service members cheating on their spouses, which she says is all too frequent during deployments.

"Even just rumors of cheating can really affect you," Gibson said. She left the military after she got pregnant. She's now raising their 1-year-old in Mannheim, Germany, while her husband continues his military career. They were able to make their marriage work.

Female service members married to civilians face their own challenges. The rate of divorce among military women is higher for those married to civilians, said Benjamin Karney, a psychology professor at UCLA who studied the issue for the Rand Corp. Research has found that the husbands of female service members were less likely to be employed than military wives.

"You've got to look at the realities of what military life is like on the family, and it really is kind of set up around a traditional married model of a husband and a wife that runs the house, if you will," said Kimberly Olson, a retired Air Force colonel who is executive director of Grace After Fire, a support organization for female veterans.

Olson said many female warriors don't get the support and space they need after war service to transition back to their roles as wives and mothers. Each of the military services today offers programs focused on strengthening or enriching marriage.

"The expectation that you can just turn that emotion back on like a light switch just because you walk off the airplane and they got signs and balloons and your baby runs to you, it is not very realistic," Olson said.

When divorce does happen, it only adds to the stress faced by an already stressed-out population.

Staff Sgt. Robin D. Duncan-Chisolm, 47, of Upper Marlboro was deployed to Iraq last year with the District of Columbia National Guard while she was getting a divorce. She said she worried the entire time that she'd lose custody of her teenage son or lose her home.

"I was able to smile . . . but inside I had a lot of turmoil I needed to have resolved, things I needed to bring closure to," Duncan-Chisolm said.

She credits her friendships and support in the Guard with helping her get through the divorce. She and her son used the Guard's "Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program" to help with her transition home.

"If you don't have anybody to talk to and anybody to turn to, sometimes it gets a little difficult, and I'm glad I had that system in place," Duncan-Chisolm said.

- Associated Press

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