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In Military, Disorder Bucks Sexes' Divide

By Donna St. George

Is there a gender gap when it comes to psychological trauma after war? Researcher Carl A. Castro set out to answer that question last year, looking at mental health data on men and women who worked in Iraq in similar jobs amid hostile fire.

In his analysis, Castro found symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in 11 percent of men and 12 percent of women and signs of depression in 5.6 percent of men and 8 percent of women – differences that are not statistically significant, he said.

“The issue was: Are women doing worse than men? And the answer is no,” said Castro, chief of military psychiatry at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research.

This result, based on a study of 400 troops, surprises experts such as Patricia A. Resick, director of the Women’s Health Sciences Division of the National Center for PTSD. “One would think women would have a higher rate,” as they do in the general population, she said.

The apparent lack of a gender gap, she said, raises all sorts of questions about women serving in Iraq. “Those who make it through boot camp may be a hardier group,” Resick said. “It’s puzzling. There’s a lot we don’t know yet.”

Castro suggested it may be that female soldiers are “more resilient” in some unexplored way. “They may have more effective coping mechanisms,” he suggested.

Across the United States, 5 percent of men and 10.6 percent of women develop PTSD, said Ronald C. Kessler, a Harvard University researcher.

Experts cannot pinpoint why women’s rates are higher – whether it is because they are more willing to report concerns or experience more intense traumas or react differently.

But Resick suggests the kind of trauma makes a big difference. “Women are more likely to have the events that are more likely to cause PTSD – rape, child sexual abuse and domestic violence,” she said.

For military women, another complicating factor is sexual assault. Since 2003, women deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have reported more than 500 cases of sexual assault to the Miles Foundation, a private nonprofit group that works with military personnel.

PTSD is widespread among these women, said Anita Sanchez of the foundation. “You’re talking about the trauma of first of all being in combat but then being violated in this way,” she said.

Department of Defense figures show 2,374 alleged sexual assaults across the military services last year, up nearly 40 percent from 2004. The increase is the result of a new reporting system and more faith in the process, department spokesman Roger Kaplan said.

Disagreeing, Sanchez said part of the jump is the result of deployments overseas. There is an established link between deployment and sexual assault, she said.

Although it’s not clear how sexual assaults will affect the overall PTSD rates of Iraq veterans, Kessler pointed out that the general rule is: “The more terrible things that happen to you, the higher the risk of PTSD.”

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