

## **Episode 242 - Dr. Jessica Strong: Female Service Members at War: Unique Experiences of Deployment and Reintegration**

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.inSocialWork.org](http://www.inSocialWork.org). We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:38] Hi from Buffalo. Summer's here in western New York and one of our never taken for granted gems of course is Niagara Falls. Besides being awed by the falls themselves one secret place is hiking into the gorge where the river's narrow path creates massive waves. Some the size of houses in the violent churning of the water. It's worth the hike. I'm Peter Sobota. What's it like to be a female service member in combat? In this episode our guest Dr. Jessica Strong discusses her work and why having a clear understanding of the unique experiences of women's combat deployment and other military experiences can inform social work practice policy and advocacy efforts. Our guest discusses how gender serves as the context for how women talk about and experience combat how it exacerbates an already stressful experience and how it informs their reintegration following their deployment. The women's perceptions of the threat appear to be critical in coloring their experiences and in the development of PTSD and other challenges of post combat reintegration. Our guest concludes with commentary about the role of women's perceived social and service related support while deployed to and upon return. Jessica Strong Ph.D. LMSW is an applied research analyst with Blue Star families and a lecturer at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Dr. Strong was interviewed in April 2018 by our own Dr. Lisa Butler associate professor here at the UB School of Social Work.

[00:02:20] Good day. My name is Dr. Lisa Butler and I'm here with Dr. Jessica strong and we're going to be discussing issues related to female military servicemembers. Hello Jessica.

[00:02:31] Hi Lisa.

[00:02:32] I'm curious what prompted your interest in this general area of research female service members.

[00:02:38] Well I started out in social work actually with a focus on women's issues. I've really started looking at like sexual assault or intimate partner violence. I worked in a program that helped displaced homemakers women who were returning to employment after taking a break from the workforce to being home. But then I as so often happens. I married my husband. And he was in the military when he started deploying to Afghanistan and he deployed to Iraq. And at that point I started becoming interested in deployment and experiences of combat because I was trying to understand what it was he was going through. So these two interest areas both women's issues and in combat deployments started to emerge. And I wanted to see what it was like to be a woman and in combat at this point. We've been at war for like five years. And I knew that women were deploying. And it was impossible to keep them out of combat. So there was a sort of national debate around whether women should be in combat or not. So I was interested in what the experience was like for them.

[00:03:43] Tell me a little bit more about what research you've done.

[00:03:46] Well I started out with the idea of what is it like for a woman to be deployed. What is it like to be a female service member in a combat zone and what started out as like a really basic question. The it was this was supposed to be a softball question that started up the interview. It

turned into one of the main findings of the research. So I asked women about their experiences of combat starting out like what is combat for you. And the answers I got that were different than what I had expected. I was operating from this idea that combat is based on action. You have to be in a firefight or you haven't experienced combat. But women were describing instead experiences in which they felt threatened. And they described those when asked about combat instead of describing firefights or mortar attacks. These were situations like a door in a secure area being left unlocked that left that service member vulnerable or a common one was the threat of sexual violence whether that actually occurred or not but the threat of sexual violence was there. So I interviewed male service members as well. And their descriptions about combat were much more of that action focused Or her location focus being in a war zone whereas the women were describing feeling and feeling threatened when they were thinking about a combat situation.

[00:05:11] So were you interviewing them before after women were officially allowed into combat.

[00:05:18] That's a funny question actually they it was before they were officially allowed into combat. And I remember that day that the Secretary of Defense Panetta made that change because I had just finished writing that chapter of my dissertation. And I closed the window it opened up the news and there the policy has changed. I would revise this whole thing now. So it was before the policy had changed. But women were already in combat they just weren't officially allowed in combat. They were it was just unavoidable for them to experience combat because there was no such thing as a front line behind which they would be safe.

[00:05:56] Yes and there were also being asked to do things that invariably got them involved in combat whether they wanted to or not. You know on thinking of the Lioness Team for example who is really just supposed to be interviewing and patting down women but they ended up being in the front lines well. So that's really interesting and it's interesting that the women's perspective is so much broader and threat related than action oriented. That's fascinating.

[00:06:22] I think we're finding that with PTSD in the research about more recent research about PTSD I think we're finding that it's less the subjective experience of combat less the number of mortars that you've experienced and more how terrified you were when that happened. It's more the perception of threat than it is the objective experience that really makes a difference there. So I think that's kind of what women were describing in this that makes sense.

[00:06:49] I read your paper. I was struck by how one of the major themes was also about support can you say a little more about that.

[00:06:56] Yeah I think one of the major issues for female service members both when they're deployed and after they return is that is that lack of support they often feel like an outsider because they're a gender minority. There aren't as many women around. So when you're deployed and you're surrounded by all men it's harder to find that female to female support. I mean you can get support from the people you are with but it's a different quality often of support in women veterans. We find that there are a lot of support organizations designed for veterans but they're often overwhelmingly male which is understandable because as our military has been overwhelmingly male for a long time and they're still overwhelmingly male. But especially for female service members who have had that threat of a sexual assault or sexual violence or even if they haven't they're less likely to find support in an all male group than they are with and mixed gender group or at all when that group that's where they can feel less supported because they have this perception of being a gender minority. And this feeling of being an outsider.

[00:08:04] It makes me wonder about did they talk about unit cohesion. Because I've always thought that that sort of trumped diversity.

[00:08:11] I think you're right. And I think it depends on the women that I talked to who had varying experiences with that. So some felt very connected with the other members of their unit and they had a great bond with the other people who were there whether they were male or female and others. And this is anecdotal but often that they had experienced some sexual violence or threat of sexual violence there that they felt much less support with their unit which is understandable if you experience some trauma from them. So I do think that during deployment female service members who have a strong unit cohesion feel supported and do a lot better. I do think also that after deployment Veterans female service members may still find a lack because they no longer have that unit support but they also don't have other female veterans to provide that experience of support after deployment or after military service.

[00:09:09] Yeah. We've did some research with female veterans. They reported things like like people don't recognize them as veterans. They think that the spouses of veterans that kind of stuff. We also do female veterans we interviewed here also found that when they walked into a V.A. There was just an assumption that they had experienced military sexual trauma and when often they weren't going for anything related to that. But they were going for general medical issues. And they were sort of put off by that which you know is sort of ironic because I think clearly the VA's efforts have been tremendous and very positively directed at trying to support women veterans in this regard. But it's but for some of them who didn't have those issues it turned into something else for them. Different experience.

[00:09:58] Yeah that happens both in active duty and in other issues like some of the women that I've talked to about during deployment. They said they wanted to prevent sexual violence or sexual assault. So there was this awareness effort and go to the bathroom in pairs and always be with your buddy because you don't want to be sexually assaulted. Actually reify to this idea that they're constantly feeling threatened. We want to protect you because this threat is always there. And the other thing that I think that the next two years is PTSD. We've done a great job of raising awareness about PTSD and and helping people break through that stigma of experiencing PTSD but it may have even gone a little too far in that a lot of service members a lot of veterans. When you hear that there are veterans people often associate that with PTSD and that may not be the case at all. Absolutely. There's a real stereotype about veterans being damaged.

[00:10:54] So why do you think issues related to female veterans and service members should be of interest to social workers.

[00:11:01] Well social workers been working with military for a long time. I mean the social work at the V.A. at least has been there over 90 years. So social workers already have an interest in working with military connected populations. And it's not just service members are veterans it's also military family members spouses and children and parents and siblings and the military impacts a wide variety of people. Social workers should be focused on female service members and female veterans in particular because their needs may be a little different than their male counterparts. Their experiences might be a little different than their male counterparts. And there are a growing segment of the population female service members average about 15 percent of the active duty population but they're a larger percentage of the recruits that are joining the military now and the female veteran population is growing as well as we're getting more new female recruits and more female service members are female veterans population is going to be growing as well. So it's going to be a growing group of people that have a unique set of needs that are different than what we've experienced before.

[00:12:11] Absolutely. So as far as practitioners go so if you're a practitioner say in the community or at the V.A. working with a female veteran what kinds of things need do you need to be aware of.

[00:12:22] Well one thing that I think social workers do really well is starting where the client is. And this is one way that that we can help female veterans in particular. As I mentioned I think women experience combat a little differently in that they may have a broader understanding what comprises combat what combat is made of. They may have a broader range of experiences that they consider to be threatening. So what social workers can do is come in with letting them self define what was threatening for them instead of coming in with this idea of this outside impression of this is combat. And you should be threatened by this and this isn't combat and you shouldn't be threatened by this. Social workers do a good job of getting rid of all those shoulds. And I think that is that is particularly helpful for female service members who have been told what they should and shouldn't do for a long time.

[00:13:17] What about policy makers. Are there issues that you think are really important and potentially pressing right now.

[00:13:23] I think policymakers should be aware that it is a a growing group and they do have specific needs. And as you and I talked about while military sexual trauma is a significant issue you want to raise awareness about it. It's not everybody.

[00:13:38] So some of the things that policymakers can do is ensure that the supports that we've done such a good job of creating for male service members in terms of like Vet Centers and V.A. benefits make sure those are equally accessible for female service members as well so that they don't come into the V.A. and be approached with the idea that they must have experienced some military sexual trauma or they wouldn't be there. One thing that I is social workers who are working in the macro or advocacy field area can do is social workers have this perspective of helping clients identify and activate resources within their environments. And female veterans have done a really good job of identifying and activating their own resources and environments. But what you see can do what social workers can do as advocates is both helped them identify and create those sources of support and advocate for larger policy changes so that the supports that are available are inclusive of their needs. So we don't just have groups that are entirely male and a female walks in and she goes I don't I can't connect with any of the people here. So there have to be sources of support that are going to be inclusive of female veterans needs as well.

[00:14:57] Are you involved at all in teaching students about military social work.

[00:15:01] I am I have two classes. One on entering the warzone and one on returning from the war zone. So I have the benefit of teaching not only students about military social work but because I am working with the University of North Carolina Wilmington and they have an extension site in Jacksonville North Carolina which is right next camp. I have many many of my students who are veterans or military spouses or former military spouses so I have a rich diversity of experiences in a classroom which makes it a really fun class to teach.

[00:15:35] That's terrific. Have you found as I have teaching that we need to sort of differentiate between military social work as a military occupational specialty versus sort of the military social work as a more general term that refers to social workers who work with any sort of veteran or military connected individual.

[00:15:57] Yeah I think many of the students who come in the idea of I want to do military social work have the end goal in mind as being a social worker. And that is wonderful. That is not the only way to serve military as a social worker. You can be active duty military and serve as a social worker within the military. You can work as a social worker in the V.A. or many social workers work outside of both of those outside of the Department of Defense and serve communities that are

touched by military impacted by military service. It may be working in a school that has a lot of military dependent children in it who are dealing with deployments and trainings and moving and all of the issues that impact children of deployment or are many other ways. There's many ways that social workers can impact families that are dealing with military service or veterans.

[00:16:55] I've been struck in the past by calls for introducing question about have you ever served into sort of all medical evaluations for example health care evaluations because it's sort of the great unasked question. And I think the majority veterans don't go to the V.A.. They're all are still getting services in the community. And as a practitioner not recognizing this someone is a veteran or a military spouse or a military child it really limits your understanding potentially of what the presenting issue is.

[00:17:28] Absolutely I think that's that's even more true for female service members because we have the impression that if you're a veteran you must be male still because it's such a large percentage of the population is male. So that question of Have you ever served in the military can really serve to identify female veterans that you would otherwise go unnoticed. Were there other findings in your research that we didn't discuss yet. One thing that we found in our qualitative interpretive medicine consists of multiple qualitative research pieces on female service members is that gender was inextricably intertwined with their experience of deployment. They had this experience of being an outsider as I said that they had to prove themselves because they were that gender minority that there were these negative perceptions of women in the military as well so they had to overcome that he perceived as as equals. And then afterwards the gender continued to influence their experiences of being a veteran because they often faded back into other roles that they had like a spouse or mother or daughter or friends. Their military service would go unrecognized because of their gender. So as you said the women veterans were often assumed to be spouses rather than the service members themselves so that experience of being a gender minority and being female really influenced their whole experience with the military both deployments and support and being a veteran. After military service.

[00:19:04] Have you given thought to how to remedy that. I mean what it's going to take. Do you think.

[00:19:09] When the population gets bigger and reaches somewhat of a tipping point it may not even be when they're no longer a minority but when we get to a tipping point where women are more common in the military and they're not such a novelty or something new. And women have been in the military for a long time right. We just haven't really recognized them as such but when women are formally he's in the military a greater degree than we will start recognizing that there needs to be met as well. And I think we're sort of moving towards that with the military in moving towards a professionalism like it doesn't matter what your background is as long as you're qualified. So I think that moves us in the right direction but we're definitely not there yet.

[00:19:53] Yeah I'm struck that it may also be sort of a cohort issue. So at the present time there are a lot of sort of older male service members who have to get used to the idea rather than younger ones where it's not novel and it's you know it's expected that may change things. But I wonder if looking to other professions that were so male dominated originally and how they have changed what the process was in their change might be informative. We're sort of fighting a cohort from a different era with different expectations and norms. And so as that gradually gets replaced I think it'll get a lot easier even without other formal interventions although other interventions might be necessary. It's interesting because there does seem to be an occupation a calling like military service which is so traditionally male we think of it as traditionally male because we think of it being based on strength you know physical strength.

[00:20:52] Yeah. And that's one of the things that women have to negotiate as they are entering a profession that's predominantly male historically masculine. And how do they negotiate that if they like to be more feminine how do they keep both those aspects. How do they keep that caregiver role their mother and also their aggressive role as a service member. That's that's a long way to stretch if you think of it as a continuum with masculine on one end and feminine on the other end. They they sort of run the gamut back and forth or deploy and they have to be very aggressive and masculine in the back and they are mother and daughter and caregiver and they have to be very nurturing. So it requires a lot of flexibility and a lot of skill.

[00:21:36] So for somebody listening to this podcast a social worker a social work student who wants to know more about military social work or about service members or veterans in particular female that is what. What would you recommend they do.

[00:21:50] Well there are definitely a couple broad resources that are very helpful to learn more about military social work as an aspiring social worker you should be familiar with the NASW the National Association of Social Workers in general but they also had a great resource or more information on social work with military and veterans. There's a whole practice section in there on their website that has resources. And there are actually competencies that have been developed that are what social workers who are working with this population should aspire to or should have. So the study is a good source Rand the Rand Corporation has excellent research. Key issues that impact this population. So if you're looking for some background that is a good place to go. And finally the Center for Deployment psychology offers some really excellent online courses both on therapeutic techniques with military service members as well as on military culture. Traumatic brain injury PTSD many of the issues that impact families that are impacted by military service. So those are the three that I would recommend to start with because there are some great resources.

[00:22:58] OK. Well thank you very much.

[00:23:00] Thank you Lisa I appreciate it.

[00:23:02] You've been listening to Dr. Jessica's Strong discuss female service members at war and inSocialWork.

[00:23:17] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at [www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu](http://www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu). And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find that under the Community Resources menu.