DACOWITS 2012 Focus Group Findings

Retention of Women in the Military & Deployment-Related Health Concerns of Military Women

Presented to the Members of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS)
26 June 2012

Structure of Presentation

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- Questions/Discussion

Research Topics

- DACOWITS explored two main topics in 2012:
  - Retention gap between men and women in a drawdown environment. The Military Leadership Diversity Commission in its 2011 report recommended that DACOWITS explore why women are less likely than men to view the military as a career and identify ways to reduce this retention gap; briefings received by DACOWITS suggest that coming drawdowns may have an effect on the gap. DACOWITS is interested in learning about the extent of the gap and plans to address it, including strategies for retaining qualified women in time of overall reductions.

  - Health of military women in the field. This topic relates to the Committee's 2010 and 2011 recommendations to end all gender-related assignment restrictions, thereby opening ground combat units to women. DACOWITS is interested in learning, after years of deployments where women have been performing in field environments, what health issues have arisen, how they have been addressed and what issues remain to be addressed.

Method of Investigation

- Focus Groups
  - 42 focus groups in 8 locations
  - Total n = 397
  - Representatives of both Active Duty and Reserve Component
  - Across all services: Army (27%), Air Force (27%), Marine Corps (13%), Navy (14%), Coast Guard (11%), Army National Guard (5%), Reserves (3%)

- Method of data collection
  - Generation of transcripts from each focus group
  - Identify major themes and subthemes within each focus group
  - Determine salient comments across focus group sessions

Sample Demographics

Demographic Profile of Focus Group Participants				
Service	**Women**		**Total (Women and Men)**	
	N	**Percent**	**N**	**Percent**
Air Force	79	27%	105	27%
Army	78	27%	96	24%
Marine Corps	38	13%	58	15%
Navy	40	14%	57	14%
Coast Guard	32	11%	42	11%
Guard & Reserve	24	8%	36	9%
Total	**291**	**100%**	**394**	**100%**
Pay Grade	**Women**		**Total (Women and Men)**	
	N*	**Percent**	**N**	**Percent**
E1-E4	51	18%	66	17%
E5-E6	61	21%	71	18%
E7-E9	50	17%	79	20%
O1-O3 (including Warrant and Chief Warrant Officers)	87	30%	113	29%
O4-O6	37	13%	59	15%
Total	**286**	**100%**	**388**	**100%**
Race and Ethnicity	**Women**		**Total (Women and Men)**	
	N	**Percent**	**N**	**Percent**
Non-Hispanic White	169	58%	237	62%
Non-Hispanic Black	41	14%	52	14%
Hispanic	43	15%	62	16%
Other (Non-Hispanic)	31	11%	34	9%
Total	**284**	**100%**	**385**	**100%**

Retention of Military Women: Career Intentions

- Mini-survey results show that military women focus group participants were:
  - More likely than men to be undecided about military career plans
  - Less likely to plan on staying in the military

Focus Group Participants' Military Career Intentions* by Gender			
	Women	**Men**	**Total**
Planning on staying in	68%	81%	71%
Planning on leaving	13%	11%	12%
Undecided	18%	6%	15%
Total	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

*Response categories were collapsed for presentation purposes. *Planning on staying in* includes all participants who indicated 20 or more years of Service and the following response options for those with less than 20 years of Service: "Staying until I am eligible for retirement"; "Staying beyond my present obligation, but not necessarily until retirement"; and "Leaving the active component to join the Guard or Reserve (any Service)." *Planning on leaving* included: "Probably leaving after my current obligation"; and "Definitely leaving after my current obligation." *Undecided* included: "Undecided/Not sure."

Retention of Military Women: Career Intentions (continued)

- In the focus group discussions, career intentions were mixed
  - Many participants were undecided about military career intentions
    - "I don't know; I take it one assignment at a time. There are days I'm done, and days I'm not. I change my mind quarterly. I've had some crappy assignments, but I haven't given up yet. I've never been able to say yes or no."– *Junior Officer Woman*
  - Some view the military as a career
    - "… I love the military…I'll go until they kick me out. I will go till at least 30 years unless they say they don't want me."– *Junior Enlisted Woman*
  - Some do not view the military as a career
    - "I'm definitely decided on getting out…"– *Junior Officer Woman*

Retention of Military Women: Career Intentions

Why Service Members are Staying in the Military

- Financial Reasons
  - Job Stability
  - Paycheck, bonuses, and benefits
    - "The benefits keep me here. With the economy I'm not getting out. I'm not done!"– *Senior Enlisted Woman*
  - Getting to 20-year mark for retirement
    - "I've also put a lot of blood, sweat, and tears, and sacrifice into it, and I want to get something out of it. I want to get the retirement."– *Senior Enlisted Woman*
- Personal/Family Reasons
  - "My kids were raised in a military family. My husband is not a military member. Both of us knew one of us would be at home with the kids. He opted to be a stay-at-home dad. That helped us– I was going to get out after my first four years." – *Senior Enlisted Woman*

Retention of Military Women: Career Intentions

Why Service Members are Staying in the Military (continued)

- Aspects of the Job
  - Training skills learned
    - "It is definitely the skill-set [that makes me consider re-enlisting]. What does the military provide that is advantageous? The camaraderie and those skill sets. The Marine Corps is going to take care of me, and corporate America couldn't care less."– *Junior Officer Woman*
  - Sense of duty/pride
  - Enjoy job/opportunities
    - "I really like [the military]. When I had been in for 10 years I reenlisted in Iraq. I did it because I wanted to and I look forward to the next 10 years. I really like it."– *Senior Enlisted Woman*
  - Structure
  - Camaraderie
  - Role models and strong leadership
    - "I have a mentor, who's also a dual military like myself. He influenced me to stay in…Seeing him and his wife with kids and seeing that it's possible has influenced me…"– *Junior Officer Woman*

Retention of Military Women: Career Intentions

Why Service Members are Leaving the Military

- Personal reasons
  - Work-life balance was the most commonly cited reason for leaving the military, which some said disproportionately impacts women
    - "…I have two kids and now my focus is my kids. I was on the fast track. I made chief at eight to nine years in but now the focus isn't 20 years."– *Senior Enlisted Woman*
    - "I don't think men struggle like we do. It's part of our society. Mommies are responsible for the health of the family. You don't hear 'daddy guilt.' I don't think that's going to change anytime soon. It's going to take a few more generations, where men and women are [both held] responsible for family life."– *Senior Officer Woman*
  - Dual military challenges
    - "I like the military. The biggest struggle is being in a military-military relationship. My spouse and I never see each other. One year we calculated we saw each other 15 days. I wanted to get out so that our son could have the stability of one parent being home…"– *Junior Enlisted Woman*
  - Single service members have difficulty finding a spouse

Retention of Military Women: Career Intentions

Why Service Members are Leaving the Military (continued)

- Workplace reasons
  - Not happy with job/MOS [Military Occupation Specialty]
    - "I made the decision to separate ... [I] don't want to be with an organization that won't let women serve in any organizational [position]."– *Junior Officer Woman*
  - Lack of promotional opportunities
    - "I dislike my MOS, but promotion is nearly impossible. I still haven't gotten promoted."– *Junior Enlisted Woman*
  - OPTEMPO too high
  - Lack of role models
    - "…I've been looking for role models. I can't think of a female officer who did it all – family, career, and all…"– *Junior Officer Woman*
  - Better pay in civilian workplace

Retention of Military Women: Career Intentions

What Might Influence Service Members to Stay in the Military

- Some said nothing could influence them to stay
  - "There's nothing the world that will keep me in…"– *Senior Enlisted Woman*
- Greater schedule flexibility/on-off ramp
  - "[What would help me make the decision to stay in the military] would be things that can't be promised to me – like having regular eight hour days…Unless the Air Force has a program that lets people leave for a few years [and] then come back."– *Senior Officer Woman*
- Different MOS
  - "I would like to be in combat arms. If I could do that, I would stay for the rest of my life. I'd like to be in infantry…It's restricted to only males."– *Junior Enlisted Woman*
- Mentor
  - "If I had a good mentor [then that could change my mind to stay in]. It could change. I do love the [military] but I'm just too frustrated right now."– *Senior Enlisted Woman*

Retention of Military Women: Drawdown

- Majority of participants are not concerned about the current drawdown in relation to their military career
- Thoughts were mixed on how the drawdown will impact genders
  - Neither men nor women likely to be disproportionately impacted
    - "I don't see how this issue is gender-related at all; it's all MOS."– *Junior Enlisted Man*
  - Drawdown more likely to impact women
    - "I think a lot of them will be affected by females. The majority being cut will be administrators, and the majority of those are females. So the admin [MOS] is one of the biggest fields that there is, and females happen to occupy that field. It will definitely affect females."– *Junior Enlisted Woman*
  - Drawdown more likely to impact men
    - "…it might get really hard for the males with the drawdown. It's hard for the grunt units. ..they're retaining 50 to 60-percent…"– *Junior Officer Woman*
- Most participants who responded to the question about voluntary separation as part of the drawdown said they would consider separating early if it was offered to them

Summary: Retention of Military Women

- Military Career Plans
  - More women than men are undecided on whether they will stay in the military as a career, and fewer women plan on staying in, based on the mini-survey
  - Those who plan to stay cited several reasons as to why, including financial, personal, and workplace-related reasons
  - Work-life balance most commonly cited reason for leaving the military. Other personal and workplace reasons (e.g., not happy with job, lack of promotional opportunities) also mentioned
  - Of those planning on leaving, most said nothing could keep them in, but some provided ideas on what could influence them to stay, including greater schedule flexibility, a different job, and a mentor
- Drawdown and Retention
  - Generally, participants did not think that the drawdown would negatively affect them regardless of gender
  - Some indicated that the drawdown may target women or men disproportionately

Deployment-Related Health Concerns of Military Women

Health Concerns During and Following Deployment

- Overall, participants had few concerns to share and had difficulty recalling women-specific health concerns

- Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) and dehydration
  - Several participants indicated having or knowing someone who contracted a UTI while deployed
    - "A lot of UTIs. Call it lazy or not wanting to go out. A lot of younger females weren't drinking enough or didn't want to walk out to a porta potty."– Senior Enlisted Woman
  - Dehydration
    - "I purposely dehydrated myself so I wouldn't have to use the bathroom, one, because it was uncomfortable and, two, I thought it was the perfect time to be attacked."– Senior Officer Woman

Deployment-Related Health Concerns of Military Women

Health Concerns During and Following Deployment (continued)

- Hip, back, and knee pain
  - Related to wearing gear
- Pregnancy and family planning during deployment
  - Noted as health concern that greatly affected performance in the field
    - "Some women got pregnant, knew it, and toughed out that deployment. If they thought that they could hide that, and didn't want to get in trouble, I have heard of that."– Senior Enlisted Woman
  - Lack of/availability of Plan B or other emergency contraceptive
- Mental health
  - Stress of leaving family and children at home
  - Stress upon return from deployment
- Other health concerns
  - Hair loss due to stress
  - Kidney stones due to calcium in water or dehydration

Deployment-Related Health Concerns of Military Women

Hesitancy to Seek Medical Care

- Desire to have women medical personnel
  - Participants place high importance on gender of medical personnel
    - "It's nice to have a female corpsman around for female needs. [They are] more approachable. You don't often want to talk to a man about your menstrual cycle, with guys you have to sit in a brief with."– Junior Officer Woman

- Distrust of medical personnel
  - Several participants felt medical staff do not get enough training
  - Reports of:
    - Lack of equipment and supplies
    - Lack of professionalism among medical personnel
      - "All the time! I never went to medical except to confirm my pregnancy. The like to gossip and talk about you."– Junior Enlisted Woman
    - Medical personnel not taking health concerns seriously

Deployment-Related Health Concerns of Military Women

Hesitancy to Seek Medical Care (continued)

- Barriers to women seeking treatment due to stigmas
  - Viewed as weak by co-workers
  - Men think women are trying to get out of responsibilities

- Stigmas against women seeking medical treatment
  - Leadership hesitant to seek treatment
    - "I won't take myself out of something if it's not that bad when I should be there [with my soldiers]."– Junior Officer Woman
  - Medical personnel attempt to care for themselves
  - Women injuries not taken seriously
    - If you have a female complaining, nobody seems to care. They think you are whining." (Senior Enlisted Woman)

Deployment-Related Health Concerns of Military Women

Recent Improvements and Suggestions for the Future

- Many participants felt that the medical treatment of deployed women has improved. Specific improvements mentioned include:
  - Having more women medical personnel available for deployed women
  - Improvements to the gear worn while deployed
  - Improvements to the supplies and medication available
  - Improvements in the mental health treatment for deployed Service members
- Participants also provided suggestions for further improvement:
  - Availability of birth control for regulating menstruation
  - Frequent administration of pregnancy tests
  - Availability and disposal of feminine hygiene products
  - Female Urinary Device – increased availability and improved design
  - Pre-deployment training for women

Summary: Deployment-Related Health Concerns of Military Women

- Health Concerns of Women Service Members During and Following Deployment
  - Very few health concerns noted while on deployment
  - Women get UTIs but they are easily treatable and do not hinder performance
  - Pregnancy mentioned as a health concern that greatly affected performance

- Hesitancy to Seek Medical Care
  - Most participants indicated being more comfortable seeking treatment from other women
  - Many express concern over training and professionalism of medical personnel
  - Many recognize that there is a stigma for women receiving medical help

Summary: Deployment-Related Health Concerns of Military Women (continued)

- Recent Improvements and Suggestions for Future Health Care Improvements
  - Women recognize that medical treatment for deployed women is improving
  - Several participants indicated difficulty in obtaining birth control
  - Many participants expressed dislike for having to take numerous pregnancy tests
  - Several participants expressed concern over lack of availability for obtaining some feminine products

Questions/Discussion

Backup slides:

DACOWITS 2012 Focus Group Findings

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General Comments

- Participants were asked if there were any other issues that affected women in the military

- Main themes included:
  - Family challenges
  - Military environment
  - Sexual assault and sexual harassment in the military
  - Women in combat

- Additional non-theme findings

General Comments: Main Themes

- Family life challenges
  - Work-life balance
    - Majority of both men and women agree it is difficult for women to achieve balance of family life and military life
  - Childcare
    - Both men and women agree that childcare was key to mother's success, but was not adequate in the military
  - Postpartum concerns
    - Women not given enough time after birth to prepare for deployment or recover prior to re-instating physical standards
    - "I also have a problem with the 6 months to get back to your PT standards, especially if you have a C-Section." –Junior Officer Woman
  - Deployments
    - By and large women agree deployment after birth/deploying both parents is detrimental to the child

General Comments: Main Themes (continued)

- Military environment
  - Military treatment of women
    - Need to emphasize women as equals
  - Stereotypes in the military
    - Women across Services report need to work hard to prove themselves to men
    - "I've been at places where I have to prove myself to higher ranking men. They think I'm lazy, [that] I don't know what I'm doing…When I prove myself it's fine, at the beginning, establishing that relationship is tough."– Junior Enlisted Woman
  - Uniform concerns
    - Dissatisfaction with tailoring/fit of uniform
  - Concerns with physical training
    - Inability to compete with men on PT standards given lower physical training levels
  - Body standards
    - Standards placed on women are harmful to physical and mental health of military women

General Comments: Main Themes (continued)

- Sexual assault and sexual harassment in the military
  - Sexual harassment
    - General theme that sexual harassment continues to be a problem in the military
    - "In [training], we're all primarily female. The other squadrons call us the 'med-hoes'…That's how people distinguish us. That was just one of the things I've seen right off the bat."– Junior Enlisted Woman
  - Sexual assault
    - No overarching theme on issue of assault
    - Women recognized that current sexual assault program was not adequate
      - "Really look into the SHARP [Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program] program. In my experience, no one takes care of the [Service member] like a [Service member]. When the male or female is hurt, they wanna know that you care. You throw them off to someone they've never met, they shut down." – Senior Enlisted Woman
  - General themes about sexual assault/harassment in the military
    - Need for more trainings and briefings

General Comments: Main Themes (continued)

- Women in combat
  - Support for women in combat roles
    - Vast majority of men and women were in favor of opening up previously closed assignments to women
      - "They need to open up to combat arms. At least the opportunity. As I am right now I couldn't make it through selection but I at least want the opportunity – if you can do what a male can.'"– Junior Enlisted Woman
  - Concern about opening combat assignments to women
    - Protective response of men toward women in combat roles
      - "We just can't not go out there because men can't handle it…"– Junior Enlisted Woman
    - Treatment of women by men
    - Physical demands
      - "Regardless of how hard I train, in reality I can't carry a 300-pound dummy…is it worth the risk? We are saving lives. Is it helpful putting us in those combat positions?"– Junior Enlisted Woman

General Comments: Main Themes (continued)

- Concern about opening combat assignments to women cont'd
  - Morale
    - Introducing women to a unit may reduce morale as a whole
    - "You might actually be weakening their group or morale. You show up at their FOB [Forward Operation Base] with just 2 females there, and that screwed up their morale. For me, that's not a place I think we should be."– Junior Enlisted Woman
  - Fraternization/sexual harassment/sexual assault
    - Concern that fraternization, sexual harassment/assault will occur with women in combat positions
  - Implementation
    - Different opinions on how to implement this change
    - Implementation with younger members or those in higher ranking positions

General Comments: Non-Theme Findings

- Promotion opportunities
- Single parenthood and activation concerns
- Unfair incentives for married members and members with children
- Human Papillomavirus Tests (HPV)
- Healthcare in the military
- Mental health
- Removal of geographic bachelorhood and implications
- Male victims of sexual assault and sexual harassment
- Repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell and retention
- Treatment of officers compared to enlisted
- Command climate surveys not valid tools to collect data