

Gender, Exposure to Wartime Stressors and PTSD in Late Life – An Analysis of the Vietnam Health and Aging Study

Reference:

Korinek, K., Young, Y., Tran, N., Kovnick, M., & Nguyen, T. K. C. (2020, June 1). Gender, Exposure to Wartime Stressors and PTSD in Late Life – An Analysis of the Vietnam Health and Aging Study. Paper accepted for the 26th biennial meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, Island of Rhodes, Greece.

Abstract:

Growing shares of women in militaries around the world, coupled with vast segments of women within war-affected populations globally, raise questions about gender as it structures trauma exposure, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health consequences of war. Critical questions for theory, policy and practice concern women's and men's responses to stress exposures in war and how these exposures differentially manifest in late-life mental health. Additionally, major life transitions and stressors related to aging, such as financial hardship and personal loss, may contribute to enduring PTSD symptoms into late adulthood. Our analyses rely upon the 2018 Vietnam Health and Aging Study (VHAS), which details multiple dimensions of health and wartime stress exposures within a population-based sample of over 2,400 Vietnamese older adults who occupied military, militia and civilian roles during the Vietnam War. We estimate Ordinary Least Squares regression models to assess the gendered associations between wartime stress exposures and PTSD symptoms in older adulthood. Our analyses demonstrate that among both men and women, the severity of recent PTSD symptoms is significantly and positively associated with the severity of wartime stress exposure. Stress exposure indices that distinctly assess exposure to death, dying and life threat; displacement; and malevolent environment each demonstrate a significant, positive association with recent PTSD symptoms. We further find that women experience a greater PTSD penalty associated with their war-time stress exposures as compared to men with parallel wartime stress exposure levels. Finally, we find that, net of wartime stressors, PTSD symptoms are significantly greater among respondents who have experienced more numerous recent stressful life events, such as major illness, financial hardship, or the death of a loved one. We conclude that women who've survived major wars, as soldiers and as civilians, carry a significant burden of the often long-lasting mental health burden of armed conflict.