Female in the Military: A Case Study of Invisibility and Betrayal

Annie Farmer
The University of Texas at Austin

Luana Bessa
The University of Texas at Austin
To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance.

- Judith Herman

**Trauma in Societal Discourse**

The study of trauma and its psychological consequences has a long and complicated history. The increasing role of women in the military invites us as mental health professionals to critically examine this history. Renowned psychiatrist Judith Herman (1997), in her essential work *Trauma and Recovery*, traces our understanding of trauma from hysteria, to shell shock and combat stress of male veterans, and finally to domestic and sexual violence against women. She stresses that each particular form of trauma has surfaced into public consciousness (p. 9) as a function of social and political context. Hysteria, for example, was a paternalistic classification borne of a social context that devalued women’s experiences and failed to acknowledge male abuses of power. Not until male combat trauma had been acknowledged and largely de-stigmatized through consciousness raising efforts and a growing awareness of the medical community after WWII and the Vietnam War did female experiences of sexual trauma, largely in the context of the Women’s Movement, come to be seen as legitimate and worthy of public attention. Herman highlights the importance of social and political context in affirming and protecting trauma victims, as well as the tendency for society, like individuals, to go through periods of dissociation, repression, remembrance, and mourning. These periods each result in vastly different responses to trauma survivors. For example, whereas denial silences and isolates them, remembrance may open up the discourse and promote healing.

Jonathan Shay (1994), a clinical psychiatrist and author with decades of involvement with Vietnam veterans at the Veterans Association, views the loss of trust as a crucial factor in the development of trauma symptoms, and its restoration as a crucial aspect of healing. In this sense, his analysis is very much in harmony with Herman’s. He delicately traces the male veteran psychological experience, using war metaphors and the universality of human experiences as
his tools. He, like Herman, challenges mental health professionals and society as a whole to not turn away from pain but toward it, to recognize community and relationship as the key to healing. However, neither Shay nor Herman address female veterans and the ways in which their distinct experiences may shape and expand our understanding of trauma across gendered lines.

Our aim in this paper is to explore themes present in the female veteran experience and, in doing so, promote a social and political climate in which the voices of this growing class of trauma victims can be heard. Currently, the psychological literature of the female veteran experience is quite limited. We aim to contribute to this literature through the case study of a particular female Marine. The story of Tara, a young woman whose experience of military service resulted in her feeling betrayed on multiple levels, illustrates the ways in which the female veteran experience is distinct, nuanced, and worthy of further attention. Her story is not meant to generalize about the female veteran population as a whole. It is meant to problematize our understanding of the veteran experience and challenge us to promote healing by reminding us to pay close attention to the ways in which such factors as identity, political and social context, and life experiences intersect.

Currently, the steady increase of women's participation in the military presents a new area of focus for mental health professionals, as well as a new societal challenge as female veterans return from war with trauma experiences that may be qualitatively distinct from those of their male counterparts. These women's experiences complicate traditional understandings of both combat and military trauma, as well as traditional understandings of sexual and domestic violence. Herman states, "Returning veterans may be frustrated with their families' naive and unrealistic views of combat, but at least they enjoy the recognition that they have been to war. Rape victims, by and large, do not" (1997, p. 67). However, female veterans in the current social and political climate of the United States often face the double betrayal of having their experiences as combat veterans, as well as their experiences of sexual harassment and assault within the military, dismissed and unacknowledged.

A recent documentary, titled Lioness (McGlagan & Sommers, 1998), speaks to the issue of invisibility of female
service officers. It traces the lives of several members of the Lioness team, a team of women who participated in special missions in Iraq, who remain absent from most retellings of history in spite of their important contributions. There is a particularly poignant moment in the documentary when these female veterans watch a History Channel special that narrates the operations in which they were involved, but completely excludes the Lioness special operations team from the narrative. The women glance at each other, visibly affected by the sense of betrayal that comes from returning to a civilian community that does not understand or acknowledge the service they have provided and the risks they have taken. These women have been on the front lines like their male peers, have experienced combat like their male peers, and struggle with trauma. The difference is that, according to the law, women are not allowed to be given combat missions and, therefore, their experiences are not acknowledged and validated. The reality, then, of the extent of women’s participation in combat, is strikingly at odds with the current legal and political discourse, and the consequence is that female service members experience this discrepancy as a betrayal.

Military Service and Mental Health

Research with military personnel has demonstrated the serious impact that military service can have on mental health. In 2006, a large-scale study revealed that 19.1% of service members returning from Iraq reported a mental health problem, as did 11.3% of those returning from Afghanistan (Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006). What we know about the nature of these problems has most often come from predominantly male samples, but the face of the military is changing rapidly. Approximately 14% of deployed troops are female and there are currently 1.7 million female veterans (Street, Vogt, & Dutra, 2009). Recent research has suggested that this group may differ in some important ways from their male counterparts. In a 2010 study comparing women and men serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, Fontana, Rosenheck, and Desai (2010) determined that there were significant differences between groups on 21 of the 30 variables considered. Such differences concerned pre-service characteristics (such as ethnicity, marital status, and job history), military experiences (such as rates of combat exposure and
military sexual trauma), and post-service mental health (rates of PTSD and other mental health disorders). Given these differences, engaging in research that is focused on the female military experience is crucial to better understanding and treating these women.

**Study Background**

The case study we examine here focuses on the female veteran experience in the current sociopolitical and military climate, and asks how it can inform us as clinicians in our work with sexual harassment and trauma survivors. The study grew out of a project begun in 2007 by University of Texas at Austin Professor Ricardo Ainslie and his research team. We sought veterans of military conflicts to share their personal narratives for compilation in a documentary titled *Coming Home*. The team interviewed participants about serving in a war zone and asked how these experiences changed them. In reviewing the interviews, we became interested in the story of one female veteran interviewee whose story was qualitatively different from those of her male peers, and who spoke to how her gender seemed to shape her experience. This interest led to a thematic analysis of this veteran’s two one-hour interviews, which we will describe in the next section. We maintain her privacy throughout our analysis through the use of pseudonyms and the exclusion of identifying information.

**Case Overview**

Tara grew up in New York City. She was raised in the Islamic faith and attended college in Manhattan. While still a college student, she began to work as a New York City Police cadet. On September 11, 2001, she was scheduled to work, but called in for a replacement so that she could go to campus. She was deeply disturbed by the terrorist attacks that day, and by the anti-Muslim sentiment she heard many people expressing. After 9/11, she had a desire to serve the country that had given her so many opportunities and to prove that not everyone from an Islamic background was corrupt. She soon spoke with a military recruiter who highlighted how the military provided the chance to serve the country while gaining a sense of discipline, an idea that was very appealing to her. She also met several female officers
some of whom were enlisted, and was struck by their leadership skills. They encouraged her, telling her she could be an officer as well, and she imagined herself following the same path. She enlisted in the military in 2002, when she was 22 years old.

Upon arriving in Kuwait, Tara was told to throw everything she had learned in training out the window. After arriving in Kuwait, she moved all over Iraq in 2003 as part of an infantry team. Working with her in setting up communication radios was Sally, an 18 year-old young woman from the Midwest who Tara described as a dedicated worker. She confided in Tara that one of their sergeants had been sexually assaulting her and had threatened that speaking out would jeopardize her career. Sally swore Tara to secrecy, and Tara watched as Sally’s behavior changed. Sally gradually became more distant and quiet. Tara finally attempted to subtly draw others’ attention to the sergeant’s behavior towards her friend. When Sally realized what Tara was doing, she was angered, afraid that others would not believe her if her story surfaced, and that people would blame her. Their relationship became strained.

Around this time, the same sergeant approached Tara, initially sharing personal information about his family and then declaring that he thought he liked Tara as more than a friend. Tara was not interested and made that clear. Unfortunately, her refusal to comply with her sergeant’s sexual wishes had repercussions. He assigned her additional work and spoke poorly of her to her superior officers. As Sally was receiving praise and recognition from the sergeant, he made Tara’s life a “living hell.” Upon returning to the United States, the sergeant’s behavior was swept under the rug.” Only after several women in different units filed reports against him was the officer ever disciplined.

**Thematic Analysis: Levels of Betrayal**

- **Betrayal by Institution**

  Tara experienced betrayal on a series of levels as a soldier and veteran; one of these levels was institutional. Tara initially entered the Marines with high expectations and excitement. She was drawn to the Marine values and was proud to be among its ranks. She described her feelings at
the beginning of her deployment experience:

When I went to Iraq, believe it or not you would think I’m crazy, but I was really excited. Not to be in combat, but I was really excited to be with my unit, to fight side by side with my unit, and to finally be a Marine and not just be a boot... I really just wanted to be one of the finest, the best, and to work with the best.

While Tara had expected her role to be one of honor and integrity, and her unit to sustain those same values that had been espoused to her in training, she came face to face with issues of hypocrisy and abuses of power. She also realized that she was seen as a tool rather than an individual. Tara stated:

I just got this feeling after awhile that I was being lied to. You know, that I was just a number being used for someone else’s gain or profit. We were disposable. [The superiors] would give a great speech to us and we would all be motivated and then their actions speak differently later on. That kind of made me question, you know, we’re here for honor, courage, commitment and yet [the superiors] abuse us [and] lie to us.

In the course of her deployment, Tara found herself deceived and drained. She felt disillusioned with the actions of her higher-ups and found herself questioning a role about which she had at first been incredibly passionate.

Tara was also surprised by the extent of her involvement in her service. She described one of her thoughts as she rolled out in a line of humvee tanks:

I was like, Wait a minute, I thought females don t go out. [Laughs] Even when I was ready to go out and fight, I was thinking that maybe I was going to be somewhere in the back supporting and stuff like that. No, I was out there in the vehicles and wherever my unit went, I went. Out there, male or female didn t matter; you are a soldier I was really proud of that...I felt proud that I was able to roll out with my unit.
On the one hand, Tara expresses pride at being given the opportunity to fully participate in the Marine experience of deployment. On the other hand, she states clearly that she did not realize, until actually rolling out with the unit, that she would be put in that much danger. Tara experienced betrayal by the military institution as a whole. Not only was she deceived about what the extent of her involvement with combat would be; she was also disappointed in her realization that the Marine ideals of honor and integrity were not followed on a day-to-day basis in the field.

Tara's experience of being surprised by the duties she was expected to perform are consistent with the experience of other female veterans. Members of the Lioness team related similar stories. Specifically, they reported that their preparation was inadequate to prepare them for missions they encountered, with one mission in particular going from routine and standard to life threatening. Because they had not had the same training as their male peers, members of the Lioness team were not as prepared to assure their own survival (McGlagan & Sommers, 1998). Female soldiers are put in a liminal position where the technical job description clashes drastically, and at times dangerously, with the actual lived experience of war. This shock between the expected mission and the actual mission is not foreign to male soldiers, but the gendered basis for this disconnect is an added element that marginalizes and delegitimizes the female experience.

- Betrayal by Superiors and Unit

Not only did Tara experience a betrayal in terms of feeling that she was lied to about her mission by the military structure, but she also experienced a more intimate and personal betrayal by those around her on whom she was supposed to depend for her very survival. In discussing her disillusionment with her military service experience, Tara focuses on one situation in particular: her superior officer’s sexual misconduct towards her friend and herself. Her description of her officer’s behavior fits the definition of military sexual trauma (MST): sexual assault or repeated, unsolicited, threatening acts of sexual harassment that occurs during military service (Rowe, Gradus, Pineles, Batten, & Davison, 2009, p. 388). Researchers have found that between 15% (Kimerling et al., 2010) and 24% of female veterans reported...
experiencing MST (Fontana et al., 2010). This large number of women is particularly troubling given the evidence of the negative health sequelae of MST. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that female service members who experience MST are significantly more likely to report mental health conditions such as PTSD, other anxiety disorders, depression, and substance use disorders compared with those who do not (Himmelfarb et al., 2006). Himmelfarb, Yaeger, and Mintz (2006) have also demonstrated a stronger correlation between MST and the development of PTSD than between sexual assaults that happen outside of the military, pre- or post-service, and the development of PTSD.

Betrayal trauma theory is useful here for unraveling the potency of these kinds of acts of sexual harassment in a military context. A betrayal trauma is a trauma perpetrated by someone upon whom the individual depends for survival, such as a parent or partner. Several studies have linked high betrayal traumas with poorer outcomes for mental health (DePrince & Freyd, 2002). Researchers suggest that such types of trauma are particularly damaging because they create a conflict between the need to maintain a relationship and the need to respond to betrayal with protective action. Although this theory has traditionally been applied to child abuse in the family environment, it is also very relevant to the military environment, where one is extremely dependent not only on leaders, but also on fellow soldiers. Shay (1994) describes the dependency of the soldier on the military to be as complete as that of a small child on his or her family (p. 18).

Tara spoke of her initial attachment to her unit as an eagerness to fight “side by side.” Tara’s excitement to be a part of a unit that fought together mirrored the ideal of unit cohesion that is fundamental to military training. On the battlefield, survival depends on trust in the unit and this is a message she likely encountered repeatedly before her deployment. Following her experience of harassment by her superior, Tara has a much different description of being with her unit.

It’s overwhelming. It’s kind of like being in the middle of the desert and, everywhere you look, when you turn around 360 degrees, there’s nothing but desert. And even though you’re with
your unit, you still feel alone and you feel like you’re not sure who you’re getting shot by. Is it your unit or the people who are hiding somewhere in the bushes somewhere, who are planning to shoot you and take you out?

Tara’s metaphor captures the isolation and fear that she felt. A natural response to harassment or abuse is to distance oneself from the perpetrator; however, the military context forced her and Sally to maintain a relationship with the individual who was responsible for the trauma. The reality of doing risky work attached to the artillery demanded they continue to work together because they were dependent on their fellow soldiers for their safety. Yet, because Tara believed that others in her unit were aware of her sergeant’s behavior and did nothing to stop it, her trust in them eroded to the point that she lost all sense of safety.

Speaking of Sally’s response to the MST she was enduring, Tara says, “She just became numb. She became like ‘Nothing’s wrong. Nothing happened. I’ve got my job to do, you know. Nobody’s going to believe me.’ She became like a robot. Anyway, they questioned and then they just let it go.” Tara observed the helplessness that Sally felt in the face of her repeated abuse and the gradual shutting down that can accompany trauma. Her observation that despite suspicions, the unit just let it go reinforced the idea that there was little recourse. Although Tara arrived in Iraq with high expectations of fighting in a cohesive unit, as a female soldier she did not reap the full benefits of camaraderie with her unit and fellow soldiers, particularly when it came time for them to acknowledge and respond appropriately to her experiences with her sexually inappropriate sergeant.

According to Shay (1994), the theme of betrayal by military commanders appears repeatedly in male Vietnam soldiers’ discussion of what was most difficult about their experience. He traces the ways in which combat trauma affects individuals on basic levels of trust, personality, sense of meaning, and even humanity. For these soldiers, these betrayals included incompetent superiors, superiors who gave bad orders, and superiors who put them in harm’s way, as well as betrayal by the military structure more generally. In fact, Tara’s story aligns with much of Shay’s thematic
analysis as she describes the disillusionment that most of her unit members faced over time. She describes new members starting out in their deployment with enthusiasm, but being systematically broken down by the atmosphere of the unit. However, Tara also felt the particular betrayal of her superiors that stemmed from her being a female soldier, a betrayal that was more relational and less professional, more intimate and certainly distinct. Although some male veterans have experienced MST and sexual harassment, the statistics show that female soldiers are particularly at risk. A recent study of Connecticut war veterans of OIF and OEF revealed that 14% of women reported experiencing MST as opposed to 1% of men (Haskell et al., 2010). If the military's response to this trauma is to disregard it or cover it up rather than punish the perpetrator, the military has then betrayed the soldier a level further. According to Herman (1997), all the perpetrator asks is for the bystander to do nothing. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain (p. 7). All the sergeant needed was for the status quo to be maintained, while Tara and her friend needed a significant paradigm shift in the minds of their superiors, as well as certain official safeguards set in place for female soldiers.

- Betrayal by Society and Community

Tara experienced a third type of betrayal detailed extensively by Herman (1997): a lack of acknowledgement of the trauma. Tara offers the following advice to those who may know returning veterans: Give them as much support as possible whether you believe what they've gone through or not. You know some people don't believe. They think it's just a made up story because, you know, that couldn't happen or wouldn't happen.

Clearly Tara has encountered those who do not recognize the painful experiences she endured and has experienced the further trauma that results from that denial. She also wants to prevent others from having the same experience. Both Shay (1994) and Herman (1997) emphasize the need for communalization of trauma as a necessary part of the healing process. However, this is complicated when both one's immediate community of peers and the larger society do not recognize one's trauma. One of Shay's (1994) major contributions to the literature...
on veteran trauma is his insistence on units being deployed and returning home together in order to respect the bonds that soldiers form with each other and allow them to come together in pain and in healing. However, Tara’s experience was never one of safety, never one of having a community. Her gender added a dangerous and complicated layer to military life, where her closest unit members were also her greatest threat, and where the very institution of the military betrayed her in ways that were distinct from those of her male peers.

In addition to the lack of acknowledgement of her experiences by the military community, Tara had the added struggle of returning to a societal community that might not be aware of or want to recognize her experiences because they do not align with their conceptions of the military. Members of the Lioness team also appeared to be painfully aware of this fact as they struggled to reintegrate into civilian life (McGlagan & Sommers, 1998). The lack of societal awareness is a fact that isolates female veterans from their families and precludes the possibility of other civilian bonds, as well as excepts them from the military structure of support.

- Betrayal in Friendship

Although the focus of Tara’s interview was not on her relationships with other females in the military, the isolation of the female veteran experience begs the question of how women in the military relate to each other and to what extent they serve as sources of support, particularly as their numbers grow. Much as sibling relationships are strained in domestic violence situations perpetrated by trusted adults (Deprince & Freyd, 2002), it appears that Tara and her friend experienced a rift borne of the oppression and sexism present in their unit. Returning to betrayal trauma theory as a helpful conceptual framework, it would be wise to keep in mind the extent of the power differential that exists between military officers and their superiors, which mirrors that of family units—a fact also recognized by Shay (1994). After learning of the sergeant’s repeated assaults on Sally, Tara tried to bring it to others’ attention through commenting on her sergeant’s behavior. She stated, “I told her what I did and she says I just made it worse. I felt so bad. I felt like I betrayed her. But I felt like I couldn’t just sit there and not do anything.” Tara was torn between honoring the promise
she made her friend that she would not share her secret, and reporting a criminal act that she knew was wrong. In an attempt to walk a tight rope between these conflicting goals, she tried to subtly draw others’ attention to the superior’s behavior. This backfired, however, as Sally felt betrayed and grew distant, leaving them both without the support they had initially had in each other.

As Tara became increasingly frustrated by the extra duty she received as a consequence of rebuffing her sergeant’s advances, she became more aware of the beneficial treatment that Sally was receiving. She again tried to convince Sally to report her superior, and when she refused, Tara reported thinking, “So I guess what you’re doing right now, the publicity that you’re getting now, was worth what he’s doing to you. Not only did Tara feel she had betrayed her friend, but she also felt she had been betrayed by her friend, a friend who was also female and also the target of a patriarchal and oppressive unit, but who acquiesced to the circumstances in an effort to protect herself.

As they each retreated to their individual modes of operation Tara to her values and Sally to self-preservation they found that they unintentionally wounded each other and became estranged. In a context of a boys club, the women who did serve had a difficult time acting as a source of support for each other. As each struggled to survive in her own way, their isolation from each other grew, even as they faced a shared experience.

Conclusions

While Tara cannot stand in for or represent the experiences of all female soldiers, she can certainly speak to the complexity and individuality of the war experience. Until quite recently, much of our knowledge about war trauma has come from work with male veterans, largely from the Vietnam War. However, we live in an age where wars are being fought in a different cultural and social landscape, and we must acknowledge these realities or risk silencing important and desperate voices. Herman (1997) urges us to be aware of the importance of a social movement and a receptive social context. She argues that societies, like individuals, go through phases of remembrance and amnesia when it comes to traumatic history: Denial, repression, and
dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level (p. 2). She argues that, in the face of suffering, there is an instinct to turn away, to blame and silence the victim. We cannot afford to silence the voices of female soldiers at the very moment when we are asking the most of them.

Both Shay (1994) and Herman (1997) emphasize the importance of community to the mitigation of psychological distress and PTSD of veterans. In a context in which the female experience is marginal at best, less recognized and not mainstream, there is not a solid community upon which to lean. Herman (1997) highlights the fact that women, in comparison with men, are systematically at a disadvantage relative to the law when it comes to rape and sexual assault: At the basic level of acknowledgement, women commonly find themselves isolated and invisible before the law. The contradictions between women's reality and the legal definitions of the same reality are often so extreme that they effectively bar women from participation in the formal structures of justice. (p.72)

We are currently living in a political context that reproduces these experiences of marginalization, vulnerability, and invisibility for female veterans, who are largely unacknowledged in their service, as well as in their traumas. “Naming is one of the early stages of the communalization of trauma,” says Shay, by rendering it communicable, however imperfectly (1994, p. 173). As a society, we must come to terms with the changing landscape of our military structure, so that we can adequately support our servicemen and servicewomen. The fear of engaging with this reality, the fear of sharing another’s pain and acknowledging a new kind of pain in this case the particular ways in which trauma may distinctly impact female combat participants and servicewomen in general can only lead to a new wave of pernicious denial and repression. We hope that Tara’s story can help elucidate some of the ways in which the female veteran story is qualitatively distinct from those of her male peers, the specific challenges and boundaries that she faces, and the particular ways in which the renegotiation of identity necessitated by a traumatic experience may be different for her than for her male counterparts.
Works Cited


