

The employment situation for military wives

The labor force participation rate of military wives soared in the 1970's; by 1979, it equaled that of civilian wives

ALLYSON SHERMAN GROSSMAN

At the beginning of the 1970's, wives of men serving with the Armed Forces were considerably less likely to work outside their homes than were wives of civilians. But during the decade, labor force activity among armed services' wives skyrocketed as rapidly-rising prices, low military pay, and diminished benefits combined with greater societal acceptance of working wives and mothers. The labor force participation rate of military wives advanced by 20 percentage points, and now at 50 percent, is equal to that for civilian wives. Armed Forces wives, however, are plagued by unemployment to a much greater extent than their civilian counterparts. (See chart 1.)

This report describes the surge in labor market participation of armed services' wives who reside in the 50 States and the District of Columbia.¹ The gains for military wives occurred during a period of tremendous change for the Armed Forces. In the first half of the 1970's the Vietnam War ended, the draft was eliminated, and the all-volunteer force was implemented.² In the latter half, the military establishment—while generally meeting most of its goals for new recruits—began losing large numbers of trained, experienced personnel. Many of the men returning to civilian life had been in the service 8 or 12 years; traditionally, they would have made the military a career. Most of those who left were married. As a result, the proportion of the Armed Forces composed of married men living with their families dropped from 42 to 32 percent, a decrease of more

than a quarter-million couples. At the same time, the proportion of Armed Forces wives working or looking for work outside the home increased substantially as shown in the following tabulation:

Year	Population (in thousands)		Labor force participation rate	
	Military wives	Civilian wives	Military wives	Civilian wives
1970	1,005	43,749	30.5	41.2
1971	990	43,747	27.2	41.1
1972	1,013	44,740	26.8	41.9
1973	846	45,468	33.3	42.5
1974	910	45,900	36.3	43.3
1975	920	46,150	39.3	44.6
1976	769	46,549	38.0	45.3
1977	785	46,712	38.2	46.8
1978	729	46,656	46.6	47.7
1979	659	47,033	50.2	49.4

Lifestyle limits opportunities

That such a large proportion of Armed Forces wives are in the work force today is somewhat surprising when the demands of military life are considered. For instance, many families are stationed in comparatively remote areas of the United States where chances for civilian employment are scarce. Frequent moves make training for certain jobs difficult to obtain, and some women must forgo employment opportunities when their spouses are transferred. Also, military families—which usually have young children—face periods of extended separation. A Navy boiler technician, for example, may spend 3 of 4 years on sea duty which would involve half of his time on deployment.³ Other military

Allyson Sherman Grossman is an economist in the Office of Current Employment Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

spouses are apart even more. In one survey, a Navy wife revealed that her husband had served 7 consecutive years of sea duty, with three deployments of 6 to 8 months each. The longest time they had been together without a separation was 10 months.⁴ Because some wives shoulder almost complete responsibility for their children's well-being during these times, their possibilities for employment may be reduced.⁵

The longstanding military custom of volunteer work among spouses, especially officers' wives, may also discourage women's labor market activity. Many wives still believe that volunteer activities are implicitly required for their husbands' advancement. A recent study found:

... special responsibilities [are] demanded of military wives. Her responsibilities increase as her husband progresses through the ranks and, as she increases the chances of a successful career for her husband, ... she correspondingly increases her service as a volunteer to the military structure and the military community at large. [It is] reported that officers' wives tend to be more active in the military community than the [service] member, and ... that among Army wives, 'volunteer' work is seen as a responsibility commensurate with the wife's status.⁶

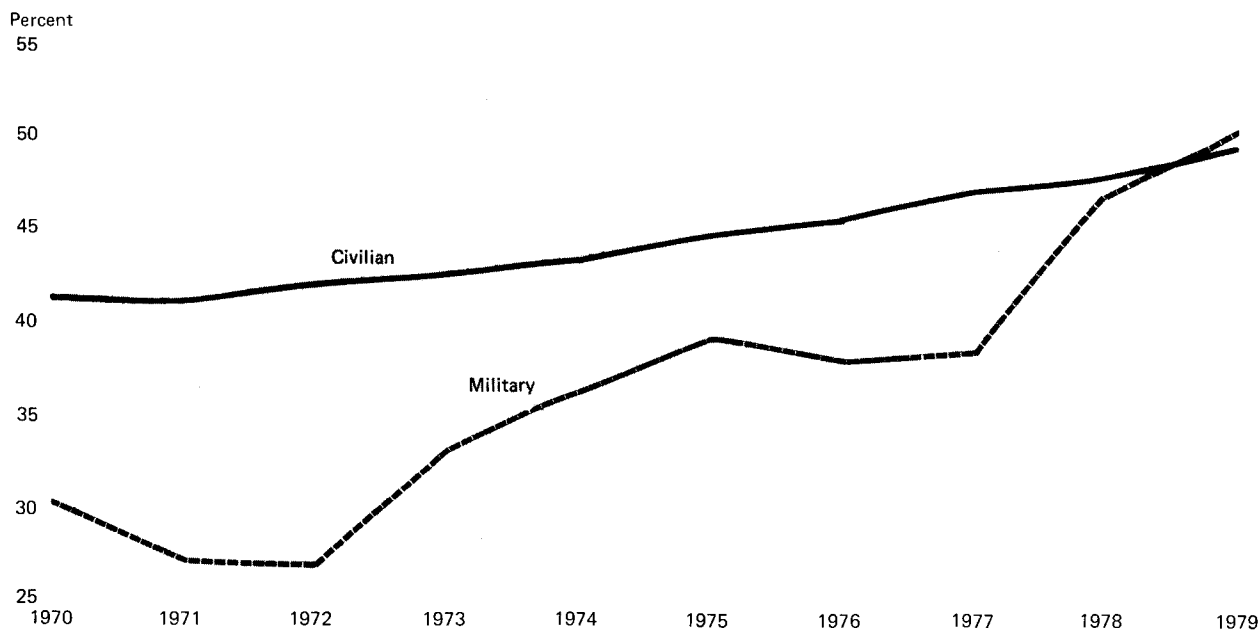
These responsibilities have always elicited mixed reactions. Ten years ago another investigation found that while some wives considered volunteer work more

flexible and suitable to their lifestyle than employment, others believed that the personal benefits of volunteerism were not particularly rewarding. Those who were not satisfied with these activities generally thought that they had more ability, skills, and knowledge than volunteer jobs were apt to require, and often turned to paid employment for greater challenges and rewards.⁷

According to a recent report, such dissatisfaction may be even more pervasive today. Military wives with good educations and skills are apparently hesitant to limit themselves to traditional volunteer work when they can earn money in private enterprise. Some wives recently noted that "... the Pentagon hierarchy must awaken to the 'new way of life.' No longer are all military wives content just to raise children, stay at home, and perform volunteer work. ... Numerous wives want the challenge and satisfaction of a career."⁸

Most also want and need the financial rewards of paid employment. While the desire for additional income has obviously always been one of the reasons why Armed Forces wives worked outside the home, labor market activity in the early and mid-1970's was very often seen as an opportunity for personal growth and mental stimulation.⁹ But in the late 1970's, as escalating inflation combined with small military pay raises, the financial obligations of their families pressured many

Chart 1. Labor force participation rates of wives by military or civilian status of their husbands, March 1970-March 1979



wives into the paid labor market.¹⁰

Once in the work force, the occupational distribution of Armed Forces wives generally mirrors that of their civilian counterparts. (See table 1.) As is usually the case among employed women, in March 1979, the largest proportion held clerical jobs. Smaller but significant shares worked at professional-technical or service jobs. Military wives, however, were less likely than civilian wives to work as operatives, probably because few military installations are located near manufacturing centers.

Armed Forces wives were more likely to be unemployed than civilian wives. In March 1979, when the unemployment rate for civilian married women was 5 percent, that for military wives was more than double at 12 percent. (See chart 2.)

The circumstances of military life may undercut the labor market success of many of these women.¹¹ Besides the problems of balancing the demands of both a family and a job, military wives probably have more spells of unemployment than other wives. They are often compelled to terminate their employment each time their husbands are reassigned—usually every 3 to 4 years. These frequent transfers may inhibit the accumulation of seniority or the acquisition of specialized skills. Many wives find that regardless of former employment experi-

Table 1. Occupational group of employed wives by military or civilian status of their husbands, March 1979

Occupational group	Military wives	Civilian wives
Total: Number (in thousands)	292	19,570
Percent	100.0	100.0
Professional-technical	18.2	18.4
Managerial	3.8	6.9
Sales	8.9	6.5
Clerical	41.8	36.7
Crafts	1.4	1.8
Operatives including transport	5.8	11.2
Laborers	2.4	1.1
Private household service	2.1	1.8
Other service	16.1	14.4
Farm	0	1.3

Note: Military wives are those living with their husbands serving with the Armed Forces in the 50 States and the District of Columbia.

ence, they must start over at entry level jobs at each new post.¹² Others are stigmatized by their military connection, and it has been reported that some employers even deny job interviews to these women whom they deem short-term workers.¹³

Children influence participation

Family responsibilities, which many times include the care of young children, may also contribute to the employment difficulties of military wives. Children were present in 75 percent of all armed services' families. In

Chart 2. Unemployment rates of wives by military or civilian status of their husbands, March 1970-March 1979

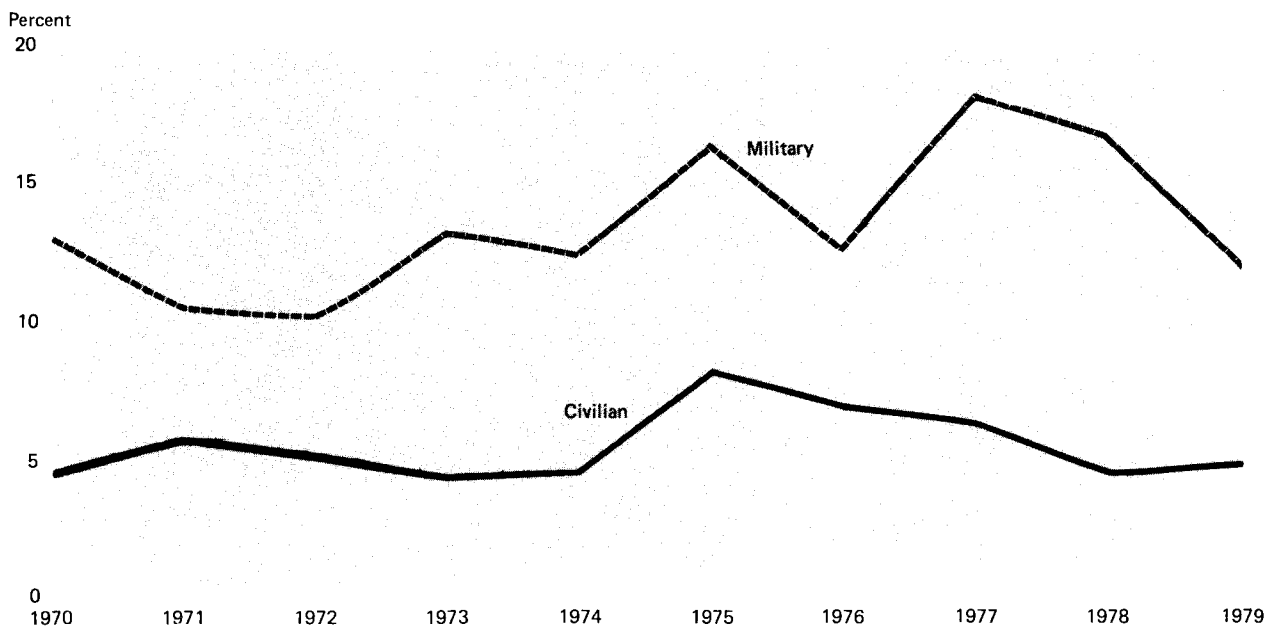


Table 2. Married couple families with children by employment status of parents and age of children, March 1979 and median family income, 1978

Item	Families with children under 18		Families with children 6 to 17 years only		Families with children under 6 years	
	Father in Armed Forces	Father employed civilian	Father in Armed Forces	Father employed civilian	Father in Armed Forces	Father employed civilian
All families (in thousands) . . .	498	22,229	193	12,289	305	9,939
Mother in labor force	227	11,719	110	7,390	117	4,330
Employed	201	11,053	101	7,039	100	4,014
Unemployed	25	666	9	351	17	315
Mother not in labor force	271	10,510	83	4,900	188	5,610
Median family income, total . . .	\$13,200	\$21,300	\$16,600	\$23,800	\$12,100	\$18,600
Mother in labor force	15,300	22,900	17,800	24,900	13,700	19,700
Employed	16,200	23,200	18,500	25,200	14,500	20,000
Unemployed (¹)	(¹)	17,600	(¹)	20,100	(¹)	15,000
Mother not in labor force	12,200	19,500	14,400	22,000	11,300	17,700

¹ Median not shown where base is less than 75,000.

about 3 of 5 of these families, one youngster or more was under age 6. (See table 2.) In contrast, about half of all civilian married-couple families had children, and in only slightly more than 2 of 5 of these families were there youngsters below school age.

As is generally the case for civilian wives, the younger a military wife's child, the lower her labor force participation rate and the higher her unemployment rate. Fewer than 2 of 5 mothers of preschool children were in the labor force in March 1979, compared with almost 3 of 5 of those whose children were school age, proportions approximately equal to those of civilian mothers.

Military wives with children suffered from unemployment to a much greater extent than civilian mothers. Overall, about 11 percent were jobless, compared to 6 percent for civilian mothers. The unemployment rate for military mothers of children age 6 to 17 was 8 percent, and rose to 15 percent if youngsters below age 6 were present. Comparable proportions for civilian mothers were 5 and 8 percent, respectively.

Because their husbands' pay tends to be low, military mothers who are employed contribute a larger proportion of their families' income than do their civilian counterparts. Despite their contribution, average income

for Armed Forces families was substantially below that for civilian families where both parents worked. In 1978, median income for all married-couple military families with children was \$16,200 when the mother was employed, and \$12,200 when she was out of the labor force. Comparable incomes for married couples where the father was an employed civilian were \$23,200 and \$19,500, respectively. A similar income discrepancy between military and civilian families prevailed among families with children below age 6—the majority of military families—but at lower income levels.

According to a 1979 Department of Defense Pay Adequacy Study¹⁴ in which 1975 mean earnings of both military and civilian wives were cross-tabulated by their husbands' earnings, wives of enlisted men generally made less than officers' wives. (See table 3.) Figures for civilian wives whose husbands had earnings comparable to those of military husbands were considerably higher. However, when the data were standardized by the wife's age, the results were different. The average earnings of most officers' wives were found to equal or exceed those of their civilian counterparts, but those of wives of enlisted men were substantially below those of civilians.

Although it is not within the scope of this article to examine the complex area of military compensation, many facets of this controversial issue undoubtedly have had some effect on the labor force participation rate of women married to men in the armed services. Even with the recent improvements in this area, military wives, like civilian wives, will probably continue to increase their rate of labor force participation during the 1980's. □

Table 3. Earnings of wives in military and civilian families, 1975

Selected military pay grade	Average total earnings of military husband	Mean earnings of wives in military families	Mean earnings of wives in civilian families ¹
0-6	\$34,105	\$3,776	\$6,610
0-3	19,472	5,649	5,243
0-1	11,886	4,364	5,141
E-9	19,172	5,417	5,243
E-6	12,923	4,233	5,141
E-3	8,756	2,699	4,117

¹ Adjusted by age of wife.

Note: For information on computations in each earnings column, see *Department of Defense Pay Adequacy Study, October 1979, Appendix C*, which is the source of the data.

— FOOTNOTES —

¹ In this report, the term civilian wives refers to those whose husbands are in the civilian noninstitutional population. Whether their husbands are in the military or are civilians, wives who are either employed or unemployed are in the civilian labor force.

In March 1979, about 11 percent of the 659,000 Armed Forces

families were black, a proportion only slightly higher than that for civilian families. Labor force data in this report are based primarily on results of the Current Population Survey, which is conducted for the Bureau of Labor Statistics by the Bureau of the Census. Estimates based on sample numbers such as those shown in the tables may vary considerably from results obtained by a complete count in cases where the numbers shown are small. Therefore, differences between small numbers or percents based on them may not be significant. For more information on sampling error, see *Employment and Earnings*, published monthly by BLS.

² Sar A. Levitan and Karen C. Alderman, "The military as employer: past performance, future prospects," *Monthly Labor Review*, November 1977, pp. 19-23.

³ Melvin R. Laird, *People, Not Hardware: The Highest Defense Priority*, (Washington, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1980), p. 14.

⁴ "Ladycom Survey Results," *Ladycom*, October 1977 (Washington, Downey Publications, Inc., 1977), p. 33.

⁵ "Ladycom . . .", p. 24.

⁶ Lynn R. Dobrofsky, "The Wife: Military Dependent or Feminist?"

in Edna J. Hunter, ed., *Changing Families in a Changing Military System*. (San Diego, Calif., Naval Health Research Center, 1977), p. 35.

⁷ Elizabeth M. Finlayson, "A Study of the Wife of the Army Officer: Her Academic and Career Preparations, Her Current Employment and Volunteer Services," in Hamilton I. McCubbin, Barbara B. Dahl, Edna J. Hunter, eds., *Families in the Military System* (Beverly Hills, Calif., Sage Publications, 1976), pp. 35-36.

⁸ Jay Finnegan, "Wives Voice Anger Over Service Slights," *Army Times*, Apr. 5, 1980.

⁹ Finlayson, *Families*, p. 38, and "Ladycom . . .", p. 24.

¹⁰ Dennis K. Orthner, *Families in Blue* (Greensboro, N.C., Family Research & Analysis, Inc., 1980) pp. 22-23, and Laird, *People*, pp. 14-15.

¹¹ In March 1979, about 13 percent of all unemployed military wives were black, a proportion about equal to their representation in military families. See footnote 1.

¹² Laird, *People*, p. 15 and "Ladycom . . .", p. 24.

¹³ "Ladycom . . .", p. 24 and Finlayson, *Families*, p. 23.

¹⁴ *Department of Defense Pay Adequacy Study, October 1979*.

Erratum

In "U.S. labor turnover: analysis of a new measure," by Malcolm S. Cohen and Arthur R. Schwartz (*Monthly Labor Review*, November 1980), a typographical error resulted in an incorrect definition of "separation" under social security data. The definition should have read (change in italics):

Separation—The employee worked for an employer in a given quarter but did not work for that employer in the *following* quarter.
