



In 1987, Congress declared March as National Women's History Month in perpetuity. A special Presidential Proclamation is issued every year which honors the extraordinary achievements of American women. Despite their many contributions, the role of women has been consistently overlooked and undervalued in the teaching of American History.

The purpose of Women's History Month is to increase consciousness and knowledge of women's history: to take one month of the year to remember the contributions of notable and ordinary women, in hopes that the day will soon come when it's impossible to teach or learn history without remembering these contributions.

The National Women's History Alliance selects and publishes the yearly theme. The 2020 Women's History Month theme is "Valiant Women of the Vote." The theme honors "the brave women who fought to win suffrage rights for women, and for the women who continue to fight for the voting rights of others." This theme honors the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's suffrage. The passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was not brought about by a singular event, individual, or group. Instead, it was women and their allies, working together for decades and spanning the turn of a century, who fought and won the constitutional right to vote.

As a veteran, life is different and interesting. Being a woman veteran – well, it is even more different. However, as a woman, publicly identifying yourself as a military member or veteran can lead to misconceptions and frustrating misidentifications.

"I have been told I don't look like I could have been in the Air Force. If I mention the military, many people automatically assume I was a dependent." I retired from the U.S. Air Force almost thirty years ago, and I still deal with the same thing.

I get strange looks at stores and restaurants when asking for the military discount. It's like they can't understand a grandmotherly looking person could be, herself, a veteran! It can be comical at times. I have also been challenged for parking in a veteran only parking space and told "You can't use that space it's for veterans and I don't see your husband with you."

Any time I see a surprise homecoming video pop up on social media platforms, it seems it is always a man surprising his wife, his daughter or his son. It can get very discouraging. Women veterans are a minority, but we still exist, and we deserve as much visualization in this niche marketing as our male counterparts.

When a woman veteran hears those words: "Thank you for your service," they take it in just a little bit more, because it means a little bit more. Hearing the words, "Thank you for your service," are so much preferred to: "What did your husband do in the military?"

Except that every single person, man and woman, who has served did something immensely important. Every one of you did something immensely important. You raised your right hand and said, 'I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend.'

Women now represent about 15% of the active-duty military and about 10% of the veteran's population, according to the Disabled American Veterans group. Women are also the fastest-growing segment of the veteran's population.

Far too many members of the general public don't think of women when they hear the words 'veteran' or 'bravery' or 'courage'. The contribution of women who have served goes under-recognized and under-recorded, making the women who served end up feeling invisible. Until the word veteran automatically means men and women, we have work to do.

If we're successful, we'll change the face of courage in the minds of the American public, so that when you say the word 'veteran' or 'courage' or 'service,' people will think of a woman as well as a man. That's our goal: to make sure that every woman veteran is included, and every story of service is remembered.

I ask woman veterans to register with the Women In Military Service For America Memorial. "If you're not yet included, I hope you'll take your rightful place in history. I ask everyone, if you know of a woman veteran – be they your mother, wife, daughter, sister, aunt, a neighbor – make sure they're included. Make sure they're part of our history so that we can make sure that history always remembers their name. It is a way for us to honor and recognize the impact women have had on and off the battlefield. Register at <https://www.womensmemorial.org>. The Women In Military Service For America Memorial (Women's Memorial) is the only major national memorial honoring all women who have defended America throughout history. They are proud to recognize their devoted patriotism and bravery as an integral part of our national heritage.

Women veterans should be recognized for their service and sacrifice in the same manner that our male counterparts are. Although our service as military women has ended, we still choose to serve in whatever capacity we can and we are proud to wear the title 'woman veteran'.

To all female veterans, I salute you and thank you for your service for what you have given on behalf of this country.

Now on another note:

In a national survey of women veteran primary care patients, one in four women veterans reported experiencing harassment from other veterans when they visit VA health care facilities. It's our responsibility to end it.

This behavior does not honor or value the traditions of military service and will not be tolerated at VA.

VA is committed to providing women veterans care in safe and welcoming facilities. Through staff training, VA is increasing the awareness of harassment and its impact. They are identifying what can be done to address the inappropriate treatment of women veterans and staff.

Harassment is disruptive to the overall veteran experience and impacts access to care. Through action and accountability, everyone can significantly impact veterans' and all visitors' experiences when they visit VA.

VA recognizes—and is responding to—the issue of harassment and the need for greater respect for women veterans.

All veterans should receive health care in environments that attend to their dignity, safety, and privacy.

- Women veterans served along-side men and deserve the same VA benefits and services free from harassment and disrespect.
- Women's health clinics provide gender-sensitive environments welcoming to female veterans. This same environment should extend to all areas of VA hospitals and clinics.
- VA's Women Veterans Call Center can be reached by calling or texting 1-855-VA-WOMEN (1-855-829-6636). Trained staff are available to provide women veterans, their families, and care givers assistance with VA services and resources.
- The Office of Mental Health Services has a Military Sexual Trauma Support Program and offers free, confidential treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to sexual trauma.

### **What is harassment?**

VA defines patient harassment as unwelcome physical, non-verbal, or verbal behavior that interferes with a Veteran's access to and sustained engagement with VA health care.

Harassment creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive health care environment. Examples: “You’re too pretty to be a veteran,” or “Hey baby, come sit next to me.”

Our research shows the most prevalent inappropriate behaviors are gender and sexual harassment. Failure to recognize women as veterans is gender harassment. This happens when someone asks a woman veteran if she is accompanying her husband to an appointment. It happens when someone questions her status as a veteran by asking about the legitimacy of a piece of clothing that identifies a branch or era of service.

VA acknowledges that other patients, as well as staff, are also subject to harassment. Whether unwanted behavior involves a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, race, or ethnicity, it is unacceptable. VA is coordinating efforts to address harassment across the spectrum.

**If you experience or witness these behaviors, it is not a compliment. It’s harassment.**

- Catcalls, whistles, stares
- Leering or ogling
- Telling women to smile
- Telling women veterans they are too pretty to be veterans
- Sexual innuendoes, suggestive remarks
- Following or cornering someone

The individual committing any of these behaviors needs to be reported to the nearest clinical desk, Facility Patient Advocacy, Patient Advocate/Veteran Experience Officer, or The Harassment Prevention Program (HPP) ORM at 1-888-566-3982, Option 3. HPP will track and monitor allegations through the centralized data base.

Strength in Unity!  
The Voice of the Enlisted

Lady Sunny Wirth  
Grand Knight