

Written evidence submitted by the University of Derby

Inquiry: Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life.

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The research was carried out in line with British Psychological Society (2018) ethical guidelines and was approved by the University of Derby ethics committee.

Background

The evidence provided acknowledges that all military service leavers embark on a long metaphorical, and sometimes challenging, journey back to civilian life. To assist them on this journey, the Armed Forces Covenant (Ministry of Defence, 2016) stipulates that they must receive timely, effective, and consistent access to support services. However, those interviewed stressed that such support is both limited and male-focused.

Executive Summary

Women military service leavers are of growing significance in the UK. Whilst it is recognised that to make the transition to civilian life seamless, they must have timely access to high quality women-centric services, it has been suggested that such support is both limited and male-focused. The evidence in this report is based on focus group and one-to-one interviews with eight women military service leavers. A number of themes were identified from the narratives. Overall, the findings suggest there is a perceived lack of support for women military service leavers. Their struggle with issues such as housing, employment and mental health was noted. Therefore, this evidence concludes that women need specific support, during and after their military career, is needed.

Terms of Reference

- 1. Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges in the armed forces?**
 - a. What about female BAME personnel?**
 - b. Are the Government and MoD doing enough to address these challenges? What more could be done? How effective are their strategies/initiatives?**
 - c. What effect has the introduction of the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Act (2010) had?**
 - d. Do female reservists face unique and/or additional challenges in the armed forces? Are they similar to those faced by regular female service personnel?**

Evidence

Lack of Choice and Autonomy:

Reviews have suggested that women military personnel experience more mental health problems than their male counterparts (Xue et al., 2015). One factor that may contribute to this is autonomy and control (Slemp et al., 2015). This is relevant as military culture, which has been described as having strict rules, hierarchal command structures with strong traditional norms and values, may offer little autonomy over one's working environment (Luzipo & Van Dyk, 2018). Participants reported a complete lack of choice and control over the trajectory of their lives while in service and discussed how this contributed to feelings of stress. For some participants this began when joining the military and beginning their career. One participant described wanting to train as an accountant but being 'forced' into the role of military clerk. Others reported a lack of control over their relationships. One participant, whose husband was also serving in the military, describes how 'you weren't allowed to be with your partner unless you were married [and] so I was forced to marry'. Another participant described how her partner would 'come and visit but because ... you are not allowed to cohabit' she was 'charged' when he was found in her accommodation.

Bullying Culture:

'Military masculinity' has been discussed in terms of its restrictions on the emotional expression of military personnel in general (Lorber & Garcia, 2010), and women in particular (McAllister et al., 2018). Participants suggested this culture often manifested itself in the form of bullying behaviours, which they described as pervasive, ubiquitous and accepted.

Some claimed that this bullying had an impact on their workplace performance. One suggested that bullying from her superiors had the effect of limiting the trajectory of her military career. She noted 'I lost my rank because of other people bullying me basically and I feel as if like I was held back by that bullying'.

Alcohol:

All participants reported that alcohol use was an intrinsic part of the military culture and was used as a means of self-medication. Some described alcohol use as a way of dealing with a stressful environment and of forgetting troubles. One noted that 'the only way I can sleep is to drink.' Another discussed pervasive alcohol use during deployment to a war zone. She claimed, 'it was a heavy drinking culture; you were encouraged to have drinks and stuff like that'. She went on to say that her drinking had devastating consequences when she returned from deployment, reporting that her 'life spiralled out of control' resulting her 'getting into trouble within the Military ... and obviously making bad decisions'. During the interviews, alcohol use was presented as something over which the participants had no choice, as refusing to drink would likely lead to social ostracism.

2. Why do female service personnel choose to leave the armed forces? Are the reasons different to why men leave the armed forces?

No evidence is provided in relation to this question.

3. How easy is it in practice for female service personnel to complain? What are the issues encouraging or hindering female personnel from complaining?

Evidence

Nowhere to Turn:

The women reported difficulty with accessing support during their service. Some suggested that on reporting problems they were often faced with doubt and disbelief. One noted that 'the main problem with the Army is that men can do what they want [but] you couldn't tell anyone because no one would believe you'. They described having nowhere to turn, often being told 'you are in the Army, suck it up'. Whilst others acknowledged the existence of the Welfare Service and Unit Welfare Officers, they noted that although help was available

for practical issues such as ‘housing’, support for ‘feelings’ wasn’t readily available. This was particularly evident when returning from war zones. One participant commented that ‘you got 48 hours decompression, so you literally had 48 hours, you went through, you sat, watched some PowerPoint, everybody was completely afraid of saying something [and no even asked] oh are you alright’.

4. Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges during transition to civilian life?

- a. **What can Government, the MoD and industry do to address these?**
- b. **What are the issues faced by women veterans once they have left the services?**
- c. **Are the needs of female veterans currently met by the available veteran services?**

Evidence

The participants provided insights into the long-term impact of service for women, such as changes in sense of self and identity and the struggles that were experienced during and after the transition to civilian life.

Self and Personhood:

Participants reported long-term changes in their personhood and discussed how their experiences in the military impacted on their sense of self in both positive and negative ways. One explained that her experiences had ‘made [her] very fiercely loyal’ and that she is now willing to give ‘150% all of the time’. Another reported improved confidence. However, others said the changes in personhood were ‘ultimately devastating’. One describes her former self as ‘strong’ and ‘independent’ but noted that by the time she left the military she felt ‘broken’. A common experience was an inability to cope and a sense of feeling alone and unsupported; ‘I’ve had no support; I’ve lived on my own and I’ve just struggled, and nobody give a shit’. This participant went on to describe feelings of hopelessness and despair, stating ‘I don’t know what to do with my life anymore’.

Employment and Housing Prospects:

Participants discussed difficulties with employment and finances. They noted that may be an issue that particularly affects women, as, in a male dominated environment, there

appears to be a lack of knowledge regarding the role of women. One explained, 'I was getting discharged from a Royal Engineer's Unit which was predominantly male and literally when I went to the Resettlement Officer, it was literally like well yeah well you are a woman and then it was like, he knew nothing about really the job that I did so he couldn't really give me any sort of employment advice'. Another stated that her post-military life posed multiple demands that she found difficult to manage, especially as a single parent. She stated, 'when you're out and you are trying to live, you are trying to find a job, you are trying to keep everything under control, you are trying to keep your house together, make sure your kids are fine ... it doesn't work like that'. Participants also depicted a sense of becoming institutionalised and unable to make a life outside of the military. One noted, 'a friend I know now, she's been out of the Military for 14 months and she can't cope, so she's re-joining, even though she doesn't want to join back up but she's like that, I can't cope with civvy street'. Other stated that after ten years of unemployment 'the only other job that would take me back is the Army'.

Mental Health:

Most participants described difficulties with mental health, such as 'flashbacks', 'PTSD' and burn out. One reported experiencing flashbacks, which she believes are 'quite common' amongst those with military experience. She described how these flashbacks engender feelings of irritability and 'complete uncomfortableness' that escalates and has resulted in her self-harming. Another participant describes how, upon leaving the military, 'she was unable to 'process' her experiences during her service. She stated, 'I'm fed up of seeing so many and hearing so many people what are struggling with their mental health, where I look at it and say I fought for my country, I don't want to be broken, I want understanding to say how can I process what I've seen, what I've done, do I say I've got PTSD, I don't know, I don't know to say if I have or I haven't'. A third commented on how, in the military, 'you are taught to compete all the time'. So, once back on 'civvy street' she felt as though she must work long hours 'because that's what you feel like you have got to do'. This eventually led to her experiencing burnout, 'I crashed mentally and couldn't continue with my job in the NHS'.

Medical care:

It is suggested that the intensive physical activity and incidences of physical trauma associated with military life may be a contributory factor in why women in the British Army

are up to seven times more likely than men to suffer from musculoskeletal injuries (Criado Perez, 2019). Further, increased rates of cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption, and exposure to viruses and toxic substances may also contribute to physical wellbeing (Beard & Kamel, 2015). In addition, many women military service leavers report issues with their reproductive health (Service Women's Action Network [SWAN], 2018). The latter being supported by several of the participants in this study. One noted that she suspected that her fertility problems may be linked with the injections that she was given during service. She noted 'I knew I was fertile before ... [but after] I've never conceived. So, there's a lot of it, we got injections and then got paperwork to say you signed to say you wouldn't hold the military responsible'. Another noted 'it affected me as a person, as a woman, to not, like it hurts me knowing I'm not going to be a mam'. However, a third described how the military had admitted some responsibility for her inability to have children. She noted 'because the Military is partly responsible, they sort of gave me treatment and stuff to help me conceive'.

The summary

Following the interviews, several themes developed. The first recognised the environment as a place of stress that may be exacerbated by military culture. The loss of autonomy was acknowledged as a factor, as were bullying behaviours. Concerns regarding the lack of support and feelings of no one to turn to emerged. The support offered was described as inadequate, and some felt alcohol abuse was the only solution. The participants identified a lasting impact on their lives, perceiving themselves to be a different people, when compared to who they were before the joining the military. For some, this was positive, revealing the military gave them skills that they would not have otherwise gained. In contrast, others found the change to be negative. These participants were concerned with their inability to cope with the transition in areas such as housing, relationships, finances, and employment. They noted the skills they had learned when in the military did not have a positive impact on their job prospects. They felt that military advisors had a lack of knowledge regarding future job prospects and noted that any advice given was male orientated. Mental health featured heavily. The participants noted feelings of depression and anxiety, noting that support in this context was unfit for their needs. They also emphasised issues with fertility, including difficulties in conceiving which they believe to be a result of their time in the military.

Recommendations for Action

The transition back to civilian life has been identified as potentially problematic for all military service leavers (Blackburn, 2016) as they are expected to navigate huge changes in their identity and sense of purpose, as well as their societal membership (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). The armed forces charity Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA) report (2018) that women in particular feel that they are not fully prepared for this transition. Further, a study involving 100 women military service leavers, conducted by the charity Forward Assist, suggested that the services currently available were not sufficient to support them during this time. Given that the Armed Forces Covenant (Ministry of Defence, 2016) stipulates that military personnel and their families receive timely, effective, and consistent access to support services during and post-military service, this may be of some concern.

This evidence, highlights some of the struggles that women military service leavers encounter and emphasise the absence of support specifically for the needs of women. It is therefore recommended that women military service leavers should be offered female focused support in these areas. In particular, improvements should be made to ensure that mentoring is available to all women military service leavers for however long they may need it. This recommendation could help during their time in the military, as well as their transition back to civilian life.

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