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Introduction

Women make up just 11.7% of the UK Regular Forces¹, with ambitious Ministry of Defence (MOD) targets to increase this to 30% by 2030. In the UK, the term ‘veteran’ is used for anyone who has served a day in His Majesty’s Armed Forces, and women form 13.6% of the veteran community². Whilst research focused on military women and veterans has been lacking historically, the past 5 years has seen increasing interest in the challenges faced by women in the UK Armed Forces and veteran community, including an inquiry by the Defence Select Committee³. This inquiry highlighted significant challenges experienced by women serving in the male-dominated military environment. The Centre for Military Women’s Research (CMWR) was established at Anglia Ruskin University in 2022, in response to recognition that little research exists focused on the needs and experiences of women in the UK military community. This paper has been prepared using the following research reports published by the CMWR and is focused on the UK context:

- Godier-McBard, L., Gillin, N., & Fossey M (2021). [We Also Served: The Health and Well-Being of Female Veterans in the UK.](#)
- Hooks, C., Morgan, L., Fossey, M., Buxton, E., & Godier-McBard, L. (2023). [‘Where are all the women?’ Recognition and representation. UK female veterans’ experiences of support in civilian life.](#)
- Wood, A., Fossey, M., Price, P., Powell, D., Chalkley, H., Davidson, M., & Godier-McBard, L. (2023). [‘I don’t feel like that’s for me’: Overcoming barriers to mental healthcare for women veterans.](#)

Challenges faced by women during military service.

The male-dominated military culture creates many challenges for women. Our research suggests that women are subject to derogatory attitudes, including a perception of female ‘weakness’ and ‘emotionality’. Women report having to work ‘twice as hard’ to be judged as equal to their male peers and having to conform to masculine norms to be accepted. Women report gender-discrimination in relation to the progression of their careers, including being passed over for promotion for male peers with less experience. Indeed, women are significantly underrepresented in leadership roles in the UK Armed Forces. Additionally, women report inadequate uniform and equipment designed for men, which can have a negative impact on women’s physical health and feelings of belonging.

Women disproportionately experience sexual harassment and sexual violence during service in the UK Armed Forces, with lower ranks and younger servicewomen most at risk. Data suggests a sexualised culture in the military, with a high tolerance and acceptance of these behaviours. Furthermore, women report significant barriers to formally reporting sexual harassment and sexual violence, including a lack of trust in the complaints system and fear of the repercussions on their career and social circumstances. Indeed, women report being pressured into dropping complaints and being ostracised from their colleagues if they report, sometimes finding the military response to their complaint more traumatic than the incident itself. These issues have been reviewed by NATO, with a report recently published⁴.

Importantly, the most common reason for women leaving the UK Armed Forces is parenthood and family life. Our research suggests that despite policies being put in place to support parenthood during service (i.e., maternity provision, flexible working) women often find balancing the competing demands of parenthood and a military career untenable, and this impacts on their health and wellbeing. Whilst a

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-october-2023/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-october-2023>

² Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2023. [Characteristics of UK Armed Forces veterans, England and Wales: Census 2021.](#)

³ [House of Commons Defence Committee. Protecting those who protect us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life. Second Report of Session 2021-2022.](#)

⁴ [STO-TR-HFM-295 \(nato.int\)](#)

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significant proportion of women in the military are in a dual-serving relationship, it is often the woman that takes the choice to cut their military career short to support their family.

The impact of military service on women's physical and mental health.

Our research suggests several ways in which women's health is impacted by serving in the UK Armed Forces. Women report physical health injuries related to training, exercise, and deployment during service, with servicewomen shown to be more at risk of Musculoskeletal problems than their male peers. Some women relate this to being subject to the same training schedule as men and being expected to wear the same uniform and equipment as men, despite these being unsuitable to women's differing bodies. Additionally, fertility problems have been reported amongst UK servicewomen.

Women report both positive and negative impacts of service on their mental health. Many felt they had gained positive personal qualities, such as adaptability, resilience, discipline, and determination. However, some describe a gender-specific impact of being subjected to the hyper-masculine military culture, including gender-based discrimination, bullying, harassment, and sexual violence. For those who experienced this, the impact on their mental health was significant and endured long into their civilian lives. Indeed, research in the UK highlights increased risk of suicide, PTSD, and alcohol abuse in women veterans compared to civilian women. Being discharged involuntarily (i.e. medical discharge or discharge due to discriminatory historic policies in the UK Armed Forces, such as the ban on homosexuality and ban on pregnancy in service) was also associated with mental health difficulties, often related to grief and anger at having their career cut short.

Challenges experienced by women veterans in the civilian world.

Our research suggests that women experience several gender-related challenges once they have left military service. Women reported that the employment support provided during transition was male orientated, focusing on 'typically male' careers, and lacking focus on flexible or self-employed working. Furthermore, some women reported challenges in adjusting to the civilian workplace, including misconceptions about veterans and gendered expectations of female behaviour (i.e. assertive military approach). Loneliness and isolation were common, with women not feeling as though they fit into either the civilian or veteran community. For women whose partner was still serving in the military, they reported challenges associated with frequent moves, and not 'fitting in' with other military partners.

Many women reported not identifying with the term 'veteran'. There were several reasons for this, including the association with stereotypical perceptions of veterans as older males, or males who have seen combat. Some women felt unworthy of the title due to shorter periods of service, or not serving in combat roles (i.e. they did not see themselves as 'heroes'). Others wanted to distance themselves from the military institution due to adverse experiences, such as sexual violence and gender-discrimination. Women veterans often felt unrecognised by the public for their military service, and under-represented in media, marketing and campaigns related to veterans.

Women veterans commonly reported barriers to accessing and engaging with veteran-specific support services, and women are shown to underutilise veteran services in the UK. Women reported stigma associated with seeking help cultivated during military service, that was compounded by the perception of female weakness they experienced in service. This made some reluctant to ask for help and support. For those who didn't identify with the term 'veteran', they were unlikely to seek out or access services badged for 'veterans' or were unsure of their eligibility for these services if their health needs were not related to combat. Additionally, many women perceived veteran support services to be male-dominated and designed and branded for men (including male-heavy imagery). As a result, women did not feel that these services would understand their experiences or be able to meet their needs. Some women had poor previous experiences of support during and after military service that impacted their willingness to seek further support, including feeling judged and dismissed, or having their experiences questioned.