

## Anonymous written evidence submission

### Introduction

I am an [redacted] I conducted research into officer recruitment across the Services as part of [redacted]. [Redacted] I feel strongly supportive of the military and our Service Personnel and seek only to support and offer suggestion and observation to enable drastically needed improvement.

### Executive Summary

This paper argues that there has been very little tangible change in past two years, when it comes to improving the experiences of female Service Personnel (SP), especially when measured against the metrics of the findings and recommendations of the Atherton Report. Specific measurable changes in policy against the Committee's initial recommendations appear limited to the provision of sanitary products for female SP on exercise and Phase 1 Training, although with considerable time, effort and knowledge of Defence Gateway it is possible to find seminars such as: Army menopause Seminar 18 Oct 23 Army Service Women's Network.

There remains organisational indifference and inertia around change, or making tangible improvements to the lived experience of female SP; perpetuated by the established systems and influenced by the actions (or lack thereof) from those in senior positions.

There should have been a proactive response to the dilemma surrounding service complaints, a simplification around the process of raising complaints, and more support for those who step up to complain. There could have been considerable research commissioned, championed and valued in the domain of female lived experience in the Services – a quick win when there are many women keen to conduct, participate in and summarise the results of such research. There should also have been a proactive response to the kit/equipment issue. Finally, a significant response to the impact of hormones on female ability to do their role (as a result of pregnancy, menopause, breast feeding etc.) has been woefully lacking. In essence, a lack of ownership coupled with an opaque understanding of who feels capable or 'allowed' to make things better.

### Main Body

**1. Barriers still exist for female recruitment.** It is harder for women to thrive for several reasons. There remains in the Services unacceptable and toxic male behaviours, however there also exists the lesser known and perhaps more worrying toxic behaviour of women across all ranks. I was subject to toxic female behaviour when applying for the Reserves and the female I spoke to was ageist, sexist and dismissive. I am participant in [redacted] (a closed Facebook group) in which there are very recent reports of harassment and discriminatory behaviour, perpetrated by a male, who is known by the Chain of Command to have done this before. I personally know of a female [redacted] who was bullied out of her role by a senior male

colleague who did not share her progressive values. She is currently in the midst of a Service Complaint and her career has been derailed by the process. Whilst the Services have taken some steps, including in the domains of publicity and training, Op TEAMWORK and Behaviours ITRs, change does indeed remain “glacial”.

For the recommendation of further work to improve women’s in-Service experiences, there needs to be research – research supported, and the outcomes taken seriously, by the Chain of Command. The gender data gap is not unprecedented and is glaring across the Services, as it is in society and therefore unwittingly perpetuates many of the barriers faced by female SP.<sup>1</sup> There have been attempts at conducting research but these have fallen foul of the considerations of decision makers, despite being championed by men and based on testimony from young females. When and where men champion responses to, and remove, female barriers to success, it is a powerful political statement.<sup>2</sup>

**2. Current recruitment strategies still do not adequately reflect the wide range of roles, trades and skills needed in the Services and which are possible for women to do.** They do not challenge misperceptions, and most certainly do not signpost the range of entry routes available for women in a way that is accessible or understood. Nor do they illustrate the wider Service ‘offer’. The current Army advert depicts a female soldier building a hospital in a disaster relief operation. Whilst this may attract some, I suspect others will be put off by the idea. Is this a female focussed advert, or a traditional advert for men, with a superficial female veneer to attempt to appease what has colloquially become known as ‘the equality police’?

From an educational perspective, so much more could, and should, be done at school level. [redacted] I am often contacted by young women seeking mentors and advice on careers, in addition to proactively seeking opportunities to support school, university and voluntary sector females in their career choices. This is less my opinion and more the composite opinion of many young women I come across. I was recently contacted by a young female who had conducted her ALDP who used me as the ‘role model in leadership’ she wished to brief about. She cited the coaching methodology that I bring to my military role from my academic work and my day-job. It strikes me that if this is something that young women value, perhaps there is scope to explore this methodology as a training tool.

Female role models from the military are not sufficiently involved in outreach, it is not given any kudos or status, promotional recognition or gravitas for it to be a worthy professional cause. Also, the Regular space appears to be the preferred option for those given the role of outreach or promotion where there is a great deal to exploit in the Reserve space. Until the annual reporting protocol catches up with recruitment and retention, through outreach and coaching/mentoring, being one of the key worthy causes for professionals, it will remain the case that few career female soldiers will wish to work in recruitment roles. It is happenstance and serendipity when young women come across such outreach works – I personally pushed to put the Youth Engagement Team in touch with 3 High Schools in my local area when I

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<sup>1</sup> Criado Perez, C. (2020). Invisible Women: the Sunday Times number one bestseller exposing the gender bias women face every day.

<sup>2</sup> Project ATHENA.

happened upon the team some years ago whilst conducting research. Whilst pockets of excellence do exist, a haphazard approach will limit the scope of recruitment and therefore the diversity that the Services wish to harness in society.

Female service personnel do not have the opportunity for building on positive initiatives, which are poorly publicised and attended, and are fraught with issues of competition amongst serving females who are keen to be seen to be doing well compared to colleagues, rather than as a result of collaborating with them for promotion purposes. This is something I have personal experience of in a forum where 'Women in Defence' and championing equality and diversity, has become a contested subject.

**3. There are many roles across the Services, and not all require the uncompromising physical standards required for ground close combat – in fact, the vast majority do not.** Women suffering from factors that have been shown to hinder physical performance, but not prevent them performing their day-to-day role should it be less physically demanding (factors including hormonal changes), can feel/be made to feel uncomfortable in their workplace. Moreover, Service champions in the space of some of these constraints are vilified by anonymous service personnel and veterans publicly online which is a direct indicator that the prevailing views of female SP remain the same.<sup>3</sup>

As a woman in the menopause I know this barrier is likely to affect me, at some point. I know that for other female SP who have passed through menopause and all of its documented difficulties, they have chosen to leave rather than engage with the physical nature of what is required and try to find ways to overcome the demands. So much more work needs to be done in this area to ensure that the MOD are retaining highly trained and motivated women, especially as it costs a considerable amount of money to train SP and recruitment is proving an ongoing issue: the UK is in the throes of an age-demographic shift and there will soon be more people in the older age bracket than the younger one. Retention, therefore, may be key in the future and overlooking or dismissing women in the menopause because of issues they are grappling with may prevent optimal performance of the forces in general. Defence has proven it can react to a degree. We now employ people until 55 (RA55) with options to continue to age 60 (CE60). We need to be equally progressive with gender, not just age.

It is evidently known and accepted that female Service personnel – particularly those with children – are under-represented among military leaders in both the Regulars and the Reserves. This is because of barriers in terms of being taken seriously, as we age and become less physically robust in our late 40s and 50s, and because of hormonal factors that are woefully misunderstood. What we could offer to junior SP and also decision makers is a huge amount of knowledge, skill and experience, yet this may be a moot point if we are offloaded because of our age or particular barriers in relation to hormonal changes.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/NatashaMDay>

Ill-fitting kit, and the persistent lack of availability of female physiologically appropriate kit, remain an ongoing issue and affect physical performance, as ever they have done. In some units, even the most supportive and inclusive, it is almost an urban myth that female kit is even on offer. It is extraordinary that uniforms and equipment are still a problem despite it being widely acknowledged that female SP are at greater risk of physical harm due to basic failures in their uniform and equipment, which can have consequences for their combat effectiveness and long-term health. Fixing these problems is one of the simplest ways that the MOD can demonstrate they value servicewomen and could again enhance recruitment and retention.

**4. Within the military culture of the Armed Forces and society at large, it is still a man's world – largely due to entrenched belief systems and indeed ignorance of the lived experience of women due to lack of data and information.**

Although many women, and servicewomen as a result, have developed strategies to cope with this, they should not have to. Reforming the prevailing culture will mean challenging those in senior positions, starting from a place of believing women who call out unacceptable behaviour, and facilitating a complaints culture that is not stacked against the complainant (particularly if they are women) are all essential outputs that the MOD should be working on. The investment that the Services have made to D&I teams may help in the future, but they have yet to gain the necessary traction, credibility and strength, reinforced by policy and protocol, to show any desired effects. One only has to look at the composition of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the huge influx of females; first in 2014 and subsequently in 2022. Ukraine is a country at war, women face the same latent discrimination and lack of gender-based clothing, equipment and facilities and yet they are able to identify and drive implementation of the changes required culturally and logistically. If they can do it, we should also be able to.

**5. Bullying, harassment and discrimination are still present at every level.**

There remain examples of senior ranks failing those they command, by not responding appropriately to complaints, minimising the seriousness of the complaint or engaging in these behaviours themselves. Not only does this adversely affect the health, careers and operational effectiveness of female SP; linked directly to recruitment and retention, it also damages the reputation of the Services. [Redacted]

**6. Some leaders fail those under their command.** There is very little use of contemporary external leadership work to supplement that contained within the Services. Leadership is most often confused with command and courses are either not well-attended, or have nebulous and historical foundations which give little opportunity for putting into practice what could be taken away and utilised. RM officers, of which my partner is one, do no leadership training once out of CTCRM. They do academic courses and professional training to promote to Major, then attend staff college (Command College). There is no leadership development. Whilst leaders of the past such as Churchill and Slim have merits when examined through an historical lens, they have limited application to modern leaders and what they must contend with in a very different world to that of 80 years go. There is an opportunity for tri-Service work, that could minimise repetition and maximise

experience; whilst there is a Defence Leadership Network, attendance is discretionary and the view of those who attend is that it is aimed at 1\* and above when the majority of leadership is conducted by privates and Cpls. It is evident that existing training and ways of working have not proven efficacious – this is absolutely something that the MOD could change, and with minimal cost, if they thought outside the box and capitalised on the diverse SP they have, exploiting the skills of people with diverse backgrounds, such as HR experts/business consultants/lecturers/female police officers/teachers in the Reserves for example.

**7. Leadership is owned and fiercely protected by academics, professors of military history or very senior Service Personnel who are at times remote, distanced from societal expectations and life outside of the military.** There are so many missed opportunities for hybrid training and leadership examination. Whilst training for leaders must be mandatory, with key performance indicators to assess its impact, perhaps these could be more practical rather than hypothetical and academic. I myself had to call out toxic and reductionist behaviour recently and was supported (thankfully) by a general to overcome the marginalisation I experienced. Systemic issues remain and the perpetrators of that marginalisation remain in role. Therefore, whilst I had the courage to complain and my complaint was upheld, how can the MOD have confidence that another similar issue may not occur in the future? Professional bullying, undermining and career hijacking can have disastrous outcomes for individuals, but also for organisations. [Redacted]

### **Progress**

The decision of the MOD to offer emergency sanitary products to female Service personnel on exercise and in Phase 1 training has been welcomed. Whilst there remains a ‘taboo’ around menstruation and indeed pregnancy, menopause and other ‘female issues’, there has been some noticeable progress in this area.

### **Conclusion**

The Services have recognised the value of diversity, and as such the worth of female Service Personnel. However, without focussed, steadfast reform, women will continue to be tolerated rather than integrated. Much more needs to be done; it is glaring the work that has not been done to address many recommendations of the Atherton Review. In ignoring the recommendations, this undermines the national credibility of our Armed Forces, and creates reputational harm to an institution that is largely staffed by committed and professional individuals committed to society, security and other Service Personnel and it is highly likely to affect recruitment and retention. Valuing females, making the Services inclusive (rather than just paying lip-service to inclusion) will optimise the output and capabilities of the Armed Forces.

**27<sup>th</sup> September 2023**