

Written evidence submitted by Anonymous

I am a Veteran WRNS/RN Officer (Lower to Upper Deck) of 15 years loyal and proud Service. Today as yesterday despite the horrors, verbal and other assaults on the person, 'not allowed' inequalities of serving as a female and additionally other minority in the Military I love the Royal Navy and my Country. I would serve again at the drop of a hat.

Confidentiality. It is vital in these days of remote meetings etc that confidentiality, anonymity and the psychological and physical safety of **female** Veterans is treated with the utmost confidence, seriousness, dignity, respect and care.

As you know some may be speaking or hearing of, or being triggered by what they hear for the first time. There is implied safety being with this type of group of female Veterans. Further when asking for the group to maintain confidentiality this also includes others in the individual participants homes **NOT** hearing or being party to what is said in these groups of women. Particularly male Veterans or any civilian. If not invited you don't get to listen. This is not personal it is an example to encourage safe practice and respect for us as female Veterans courageous enough to speak.

Personally, I want to be involved in as much as I can with regard to female Veterans experience and be an active part of the solution and acknowledgement of our experience.

'Not Allowed' does NOT mean Not Being Able.

Female Veterans like me who were subject to the multitude of 'Not Allowed' and who began to break through e.g., integrating from the WRNS to the RN have lost a lot.

In the RN we are known as the pioneer generation going from Blue (WRNS) to Gold (RN).

We were institutionally diminished, restricted and treated as a matter of course as 'not as important or as good as the male military' with ability, opportunity being side lined and minimised. This was not because they were better by a long shot, a significant amount of the men was no more than average and hid amongst other men in a culture toxically and unfairly biased to them on all levels. They were also not subject to the 24/7 intense and intolerable scrutiny the females were psychologically, physically and sexually.

My experience is there is a loneliness to female Military Service and female leadership in particular, which the men never experience because they are part of the always supportive male patriarchal pack no matter what their ability, behaviour or decision making.

I have seen a badly behaved average males supported, excused and promoted over exceptional females.

Physical strength is only part of Military service and leadership, it takes other skills too including psychological resilience, broader awareness other than egotistical self which I found many male colleagues lacked.

I also experienced many men just passing physical tests and not being put under the same scrutiny as female military. I remember the feeling of those men waiting for me to trip up or know I may not get the support a male colleague would give another male.

It was well if you want to do this role then you just get on with it, if he makes a mistake it was well you know he's learning if a woman made one it was look see they can't hack it. Don't support her.

I was top of my class in my air engineering training in a class of all males, we got on but I felt alone under more scrutiny and I have to say their immaturity and stupidity drove me mad at times.

However, optimum physical fitness in each person no matter what the gender is still important. I believe as warfare and defence of the Country becomes more technical and with better more suitable kit for females with proportional passing of physical tests aligned to female physicality (as they do in the US military) women will be proven/shown to be the exceptional Military they really are. Probably edging many of the men in actual leadership, effort, concentration, adaptability, professionalism, capability and proportionally physically too.

My experience as a female leader and when I was working on both the lower and upper deck, was I felt (despite working with some very professional (male colleagues) lonely. There is a special loneliness to female leadership*.

I knew I had to be 24/7 personally resilient, strong and true in my decision making with the niggle of there was always a male or males who would undermine or snigger or laugh if something did not go to plan where a male would be supported.

One thing I know from this is I do not need the pack I can do it myself and there are always at some point the professional, decent men you can rely on you have to find them and they have to be brave to stand up.

It is important to remember the very senior Officers of all Services were part of the culture and despite their 'support' now some may not be true in what they say in front of Ministers. The term 'what 'some' men say behind closed doors' remains true in my opinion.

An example I was told of an incident at a meeting at I think the House of Commons hosted by Johnny Mercer about the experiences of female Veteran bullying and sexual assault. A senior male Army Officer quietly said to a female civilian involved in the research 'these women shouldn't join if they can't take the banter'. This is another example of what we are up against even now.

I would like to state this is not all men (as there has been some change in some male behaviour) but my experience is generally most men find it difficult if not impossible to show personal and professional courage to stand up to other men when they are being sexist and misogynist amongst other 'ists'.

Also, men in general are socialised from birth that they are leaders, the alpha and know best. This is a lie to both those women who are affected by it and by those men who are supported by a patriarchal societal construct which lies to them about their real ability if they were on a more even 'playing field' with women without that support.

Experiences pre-Service.

As a girl brought up in the 70's and joining the WRNS in 1982 as a young woman at 18 I never wanted to fit the female stereotype of typist, shop worker or stereotypical female. I did not value my life by 'finding 'a man' to marry and stay in a box subjugated to his whims and what he wanted or decided to share with me about what he did in the world or hear the world from only his view and under his economical/situational control.

I did not have a happy childhood and I saw the Military as I was able to measure it at that time compared to civvy street a place where I could have a career in my own right control of my choices and finances. I suppose I ran away to 'sea'. I bought my first house aged 20.

Experiences in Service.

I didn't understand I was gay when I joined, social pressure and societal expectation was confusing, oppressive and toxic. I spent my career using 80% of my energy masking my every move or look or word in case I was caught out for being gay.

- I was subject to blackmail which I did not collude with but getting rid of him was a horrible experience, bullying and harassment both psychological, threatening, physical and sexual.
- I felt separate, alone enforced lonely as I could not make real friends to go on weekend or holiday with in case I was found out.
- I could not ever relax or be myself like my heterosexual colleagues did.
- You had to be careful in phone calls from phone boxes in the mess. Who is listening, remembering to clear the last number you called. No mobiles then.
- I never wrote diary in case the SIB suspected me and came to arrest me and searched my belongings. So, a large part of my life is not recorded even in a limited way.
- I was careful of anything I said or wrote.
- I could not share the highs and lows of any relationship I had or acknowledge her existence as my partner.
- I had to say I had been on weekend/leave to see friends.
- It was particularly cruel if a relationship finished and you had to keep it all in.
- Being hunted as we were stopped me fulfilling my capability and I did not have the freedom my heterosexual colleagues had to just get on with my career without the constant fear of being 'caught' and thrown out.
- Hearing the constant revolting homophobic slurs and vile stories of homophobic bullying completed the atmosphere of psychological fear I lived in.
- Add to this the general misogyny and racism it was a constant assault on individual psychology.
- **Banter is not a stand alone word it goes hand in hand with the word behaviour.**
- Toxic banter is not a measure of societally constructed masculinity it is the exposing of it as bullying and hateful and weak.
- The military at the time institutionally made being a female and gay psychologically unsafe and hostile.
- The military failed in their duty of care to us as loyal and highly capable members of HM Armed Forces.
- Denial of self over such a long time was so very damaging to me as a person. • I really don't know who I am.
- **Again, Not Allowed does not mean NOT ABLE!**

Banter and other toxic behaviour.

My experience is some servicewomen will say they never experienced any harassment. This cannot be true. I have found when you begin a conversation, they have but we are pressured to play the game 'deny to survive'. Our tolerance to what is wrong is increased to get by and not be labelled as a weak woman not one of the lads. Not able to hack being in the military.

My view is being in the Military with men does not mean I have to accept as a matter of course brutal treatment, bullying, sexual assault, harassment because it is a male 'macho' environment. It was my environment too.

Being told well if you want to work with the men what do you expect!

I expect them to behave like professionals not sexist, misogynist, bullying, homophobic, racist barbarians.

We need to reframe what 'working with the men means' because many of these behaviours are illegal and against employment law.

The public accommodating that working with men has to be harsh, the acceptance men behave badly as a matter of gender needs to be addressed because not all men behave that way. It is a lie in plain sight and oppressive. Unfortunately, due to still patriarchy and the success of the socialisation of it on both women and men, there are women who will undermine other women as a matter of course and in the face of evidence to the contrary.

I did not want to leave the RN I was totally committed with nearly 15 year's Service. I was constructed to leave by a Lt Cdr who said 'I know what you are and I am going to get rid of you!' he would not give me the report I needed for Medium Career Commission.

I was in shock my life destroyed from age 18 I loved my career, I achieved. There was no proper resettlement, no qualifications they get now for all of the leadership and other courses I did. No support with further learning.

Thrown out into a society (even now) that does not acknowledge female Veterans or understand we do the same as the men or would have but were not allowed. We are ghosted out here, diminished our leadership and people skills labelled as over assertive, loud, aggressive or just ignored.

Our Service is the same as a male Veteran but does not get acknowledged. All that skill and positive female role modelling wasted, women wasted, lives wasted.

Women not allowed on frontline ironically was because of the male emotion around it, my life, my body, my decision.

Since being constructed to leave the Royal Navy I am still so very proud to have served my life has been a nightmare of unemployment, loneliness and separateness.

I have a life unrequited.

This is not an exhaustive account.

Female veterans over the decades have had horrific and discriminatory experiences the baseline is being female then add what ever difference on top to increase the discrimination.

Some will never speak because there is always even in society now nasty undermining blow back against females who speak about negative male behaviour.

The committee and those who realise there have been and are very serious discriminatory experiences must I request be as one in presenting a strong presentation of unity against the further diminishing and abuse of female veterans experience.

I think we know this is not just a Military issue it is societal and this can be a used to eventually effect change.

What is masculinity it is a construct. Bad behaviour is a choice.

I am very keen to be involved in the research and action required to gain understanding of what female Veterans experienced from my generation and those since of whatever our service.

I request I am able to speak to and answer questions of this committee. I find there is a circuit of the same people who get chosen to represent us who actually don't.

***SOE prog on BBC2 was a very interesting study of female leadership during the war.**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09zg6f4>

7 January 2021