

Written evidence submitted by Forward Assist, Salute Her

Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life

Forward Assist is a multi-award winning 'veteran centric' charity based in the North East of England. Forward Assist is led and staffed by professionally qualified staff with extensive experience in the social care sector. See www.forward-assist.com for more details.

Forward Assist established its first gender-specific service for women veterans over 10 years ago. Many women were returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with diagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In 2017, we formalised the support provided to women veterans by establishing the 'Salute Her' Research Collaborative & The Women Veterans Task Force. The groundbreaking Salute Her women veterans support team (soon to become a registered charity in England & Wales 2021) fosters Post Traumatic Growth and trauma informed therapies for those impacted by Military Sexual Trauma and/or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Through consultation, peer-led support groups and campaign activities we have been able to design a service that is fit for purpose, gender specific, needs-led and person-centered. For the first time, women from all three services are given a voice via the research collaborative so that they no longer remain a hidden population within the military veteran community and their collective 'lived experience' aims to influence policy change. Our ethnographic research paper no mans Land and Executive Summary can be downloaded at: <https://www.forward-assist.com/salute-her-research>

Hard copies X2 were also sent to the Defence Committee in 2020.

Team Forward Assist Perspective

Our research and peer led consultation groups has given us a unique insight into the issues faced by women service personnel during and after service. Throughout this report we will use the term Women Veterans.

Issues:

Women do not identify with the term 'veteran, typically because it evokes a male image creating a barrier to women veterans identity. As a result, they feel disenfranchised and disconnected from support services that are predominantly designed for men. On return to civilian life they feel that their service does not matter and their contribution and sacrifice is not recognised by society. These issues are further exacerbated for women from the BAME and LGBTQ+ communities. Many report feeling overlooked abandoned and discriminated against when not wearing uniform. Highly visible when serving-invisible afterwards. More work needs to be done to embrace understand promote diversity, women veteran narratives and intersectionality.

Service life brings with it unique family pressures for women, especially single mothers during deployments. Many rely on family members to take over childcare responsibilities which puts a strain on both the child/children and/or family relationships.

Gender Specific Health Issues

During operations many women reported that they were issued with ill-fitting body armour (designed for men) which left them vulnerable to serious life threatening injury. Heavy equipment and fitness tests designed by men result in long term muscular skeletal injuries for many women. During exercises and operations women reported a lack of privacy when carrying out bodily functions, the lack of access to sanitary wear resulted in women having to improvise with spare clothing (socks) which led in some cases to long term kidney damage and urinary tract infections.

Women veterans report significant problems relating to PTSD, adjustment issues, anxiety, depression, the effect of toxic leadership and bullying, Moral injury and survivor guilt for those that experienced or witnessed sexual assault or bullying during service but did not report it. These issues are further exacerbated for those survivors of in-service harassment, bullying, sexual assault and rape. The term Military Sexual Trauma is not recognised by the Ministry of Defence or the Office for Veterans Affairs and despite the raising of this issue with both parties, neither appears interested in recognising the unique aspects or long term impact on those traumatised by sexual assault during military service. For those that have experienced sexual assault whilst serving there is very little evidence that the system supports or believes them. The Armed Forces Ombudsman recently told the Defence Committee about her concerns in regards to this matter and for women currently going through the complaints procedure there is very little faith in the system with many choosing to leave the military rather than suffer further humiliation and psychological trauma. Victims are fearful of career impacting reprisals, many find that the problem is located with them rather than the perpetrator and leadership protect the reputation of the institution rather than the rights of the individual. This can and does lead to very poor expectations and outcomes for women returning to live in the civilian world. Poor mental health and a lack of specialist services such as the Salute Her Military Sexual Trauma support service mean many are on a pathway of despair with multiple complex unmet needs, characterised by depression, anxiety, self-isolation, self-harm, addiction, poor physical health, broken relationships, long term unemployment and limited life chances. A continuum of harm that could have been avoided and one that costs the public purse millions of pounds every year.

Lack of Research

There is very little academic research looking into the needs of service women and women veterans. This is in direct contrast to our 'Five Eyes' partners, European and UN members who are years ahead of the UK. The recent research carried out by Anglia Ruskin University on behalf of the Cobseo 'Female Veterans' sub group utilised the lived experience of a very small sample group. In our opinion, large

scale research and consultation exercises need to be carried out if we are to truly understand the issues affecting this hidden, marginalised and forgotten population.

It is a concern that there is no research in the UK looking into, homeless women veterans, women veterans involved with the Criminal Justice System, Women veterans with drug and alcohol dependency issues and the causal factors influencing women veteran suicide. All these research opportunities and issues have been ignored because women only account for 11% of the Armed forces. A view point that is both anachronistic and discriminatory. There are many examples of women reservists on our case load reporting similar issues to those highlighted above and in our experience this leads to self-isolation, unemployment, destructive behaviour, relationship breakdown, self-harm, loneliness and for some, suicide ideation long after they have left the military.

Salute Her Women Veterans Viewpoints & Perspectives:

During service key issues described by women reservists include:

- They are usually provided with second-hand equipment which isn't fit for its intended purpose.
- Many do not feel like their service is valued and is unappreciated.
- Many reservists feel that they don't get the recognition they deserve, many are juggling a full time job and family as well as being a reservist.
- Some women felt like regular soldiers looked down on them and classed them as amateur or part-time soldiers.
- Women reservists feel like they have to prove themselves more than regular women personnel.
- Many reservists feel that they are not given the same protection as regular service women personnel.

Why do female service personnel choose to leave the armed forces?

- Many find it virtually impossible to have children and juggle a busy career often feeling that the military is biased and ill disposed towards mothers in the military.
- A lot of women view their time in the military with rose-coloured glasses. When something goes drastically wrong they begin to see how they are not protected.
- Women can't cope with the trauma they sustained and don't feel safe.
- Women are not given the same promotion opportunities that men are given and leave to better their career opportunities.

- Women have lost confidence in the military justice system.
- Can't get over the trauma and are constantly re triggered or traumatised during and after service.
- Feeling invisible and that they don't matter.
- Being made to feel like they were responsible for being sexually assaulted and not believed.
- Un-safe working environment.
- Poor working conditions.

How easy is it in practice for female service personnel to complain?

It's is easy to fill in the Annex F service complaint form however;

- The process is long and drawn-out and does not take into account how difficult it is for the victim.
- Many are still waiting for an outcome to their service complaint years after lodging it.
- Victims are frightened that making a service complaint will impact on their career opportunities.
- No confidence or trust in the chain of command.
- A lot feel like they are set up to fail and that their service complaint will be dismissed.
- There is lack of independent mental health support to enable victims to make a successful complaint

What are the issues encouraging or hindering female personnel from complaining?

- Lack of confidentiality and data protection. This in turn causes the victim to be ostracised from their unit.
- No trust in the process
- Many are made to feel like the problem lies with them and not perpetrator
- Victims feel like the military judicial system is corrupt and set up to protect the military's reputation.
- They are often viewed as being weak for complaining and should just get on with it.

- The Military Police and SIB currently investigate allegations of abuse and the women accessing our service would like such matters referred directly to civilian police for investigation.

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

- Having nobody to talk to, or to confide in, is a challenge.
- Experiencing trauma perpetrated by the opposite sex makes it virtually impossible to attend services that are often accessed by men.
- There are no spaces where they feel comfortable and/or spaces where they feel safe.
- Women are not recognised as veterans and feel like they are not recognised for their service.
- Women veterans have different social and psychological experiences.
- Many women feel like they have to conform to gender stereotypes in the civilian world (ie women who are strong leaders are classed as bitches or intimidating)
- Isolation and a lack of peer support makes transition much harder.
- Career Transition is not fit for purpose and promotes jobs in stereotypical male dominated areas such as construction.
- Gender-Specific treatments for mental health disorders are limited or none existent.

What can Government, the MoD and industry do to address these?

See Recommendations in 'No Man's Land' Link provided above.

In summary, women veterans are a hidden, forgotten population whose service, sacrifice and contribution is often overlooked and undervalued. Whilst many report a positive experience when serving in the military every effort must be made to make sure that those joining the services in the future are protected and safe.

11 January 2021