

**Written evidence submitted by Cdr Suzy Conway OBE RN**

**Women in the Armed Forces**

I start by saying, I never usually feed into surveys like this. I have never seen the need as my 24 years in the Royal Navy has been relatively plain sailing (pardon the pun) as far as career progression and treatment has been concerned. But as I now sit and consider whether it is time for me to call it a day and take a break from an institution that is all I have known for my working life, I thought it was time I captured some of the considerations in my head.

The first thing to say, right up front, is that on the whole I still love being in the Navy. Why? The people. I have been surrounded for the past 2 decades by fantastic, determined, committed and loyal people. I am a logistics officer by trade (although with a focus on the people and training side of life) which is a female heavy branch, certainly as a junior officer. My entire focus is on providing support to people which, in itself, is an interesting window on behaviours and expectations.

As I look at my peer group – senior females in my branch in the RN – we compete well against our male counterparts and branch wise, possibly have the highest female representation at Commander and above. But when I consider how many of us have children, it suddenly becomes clear that many of the group of senior females do not have children. My daughter is now 15 and has known nothing bar me serving. But I have missed chunks of her life, including almost an entire year between July 2019 and July 2020 when I was deployed on an Operational Tour.

If we unpick this last deployment. It was scheduled to be 9 months. That was extended for several reasons, one of which was the unwillingness of females in my branch who have children to undertake deployed service. Because of this, not only was I extended in theatre and thus my separation from my child extended, but another male officer was expected to relieve me. It is an interesting dynamic, or I have always thought it so – our Terms and Conditions of Service (TACOS) do not change when we have children – male or female – yet so many (especially) females seem to feel that they should not deploy due to having children. Not only is this frustrating to the females that continue to deploy on a practical front, but it engenders a perception of how all females act in the RN which is desperately damaging.

Why so damaging? Well, the RN like any long standing institution, is mired by institutionalised prejudices and failings. I joined in 1997, not many years after women went to sea and WRENS were no more, and then we were very much the minority. Over the years, the number of women has increased and we are now accepted as members of the Royal Navy. I was viewed as a female officer; now, on the whole, I believe I am viewed as just an officer. But for all the strides forward we have taken by fighting the wrongs from within and just demonstrating that we can deliver as well as our male colleagues, we slide backwards when we demand equality but also demand something different because we are mothers, or wives.

Over the course of my career, the opportunities for women have increased tremendously and all branches of the RN are now open to females. The support structure has likewise increased; opportunities exist for Career Intermissions, additional leave to support adoption or parenting, flexible working so you can limit days worked or deployability for a period of time, wrap around childcare is being introduced, flexibility and choice in significantly subsidised family housing. It is easy to look at small elements of military life and criticise, but when considered as a whole, what is on offer to all remains for the majority, a fabulous 'offer'.

This is starting to sound like the system selling itself, but it isn't. I haven't made use of many of the provisions open to me and my journey through hasn't been simple at times. In 2008 in the middle of a sea assignment I had a massive stroke and had to learn to walk again in a 9 month period in rehab; in 2017 I broke my right ankle which again saw me in rehab. Whilst this sounds awful, it would have been much worse had I not been in the RN and had access to amazing medical and rehabilitation services, and not been supported by my employers throughout with time to recover and regain fitness for both life and deployability.

Have I faced discrimination? Possibly. Have I overcome discrimination. Probably. Has it affected who I am or my will to stay in the RN? No. Difficult decisions have had to be made at times, but that is no different from any walk of life. Yes, I am lucky and my husband is 11 years older than me and have played the part of the stable parent for the past 15 years (he quite enjoys being a retired stay-at-home dad if the truth be told). But compromise comes for people in all walks of life and we all need to be responsible for decisions and choices. All I can say, for my situation, is that I have never felt that my TACOS in the RN limit my ability to be a mother or have been so restrictive that I felt it necessary to leave.

So why am I thinking of what comes next? Simple, after 24 years where I have given myself fully to the RN, it is time to start thinking about life beyond. I am unlikely to promote further, I have been fortunate enough to complete a Defence sponsored MPhil which has made me realise I can turn my hands to other things, I was privileged to receive an OBE in the Operational Honours List for the period of my last Operational Tour and in 2 years my daughter will complete her schooling and head off to university. I will leave with good memories and positive outlook on my Career. That seems like the right time to stop – although I'll probably get offered an amazing job next and defer the decision for another two years...

*27 January 2021*