

**Written evidence submitted by the Military War Security Research Group,  
Newcastle University**

**Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life**

**Authors**

**Military War Security Research Group (MWSRG), Newcastle University**

Established in 2012 MWSRG brings together researchers from across Newcastle University who study military, war and security issues from social science and humanities perspectives. Our intellectual approaches are diverse, ranging from historical, literary and cultural studies, to arts practice in drawing and film, to legal, sociological and political analyses of military and state security activities at national and international scales. A number of our members are actively researching different aspects of women's integration into, and demobilisation from, the armed forces at a UK and international level. This contribution details the relevant insights from such research on which the authors would be happy to be invited to expand further.

**About the authors**

Dr **Alice Cree**, Research Fellow in Human Geography, Newcastle University

Dr Cree is an academic researching gender and militarism. Her current work explores the ways in which the impacts of military participation, deployment, and conflict can be felt in the home and in personal relationships.

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Dr Jude is an academic researching gendered military practices of Western and non-Western armed forces. She is currently investigating lived experiences of NATO's military exercises in Central and Eastern Europe.

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Professor Woodward researches gender and military issues. She is a co-editor of the *Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (Palgrave, 2017).

Dr **Katharine A. M. Wright**, Senior Lecturer in International Politics, Newcastle University.

Dr Wright is an academic researching gender and security, including the integration of women in NATO armed forces. She is an author of *NATO, Gender and the Military: Women Organising from Within* (Routledge, 2019).

**Introduction**

The UK requires fully functioning armed forces, able to make maximum use of the talents and capabilities of all its personnel. Recent policy interventions around family-

friendly working and against harassment and discrimination are welcome; they benefit both male and female personnel. We outline below our responses to the Committee's specific question concerning unique challenges faced by women personnel. We note that military women's experiences sit within a wider cultural and social understanding of gender in the UK armed forces. The gradual transformation within this culture, towards one which fully values the skills and capabilities of all personnel, is evident. However, we are mindful of the slow pace of change, and of the continued salience of an (outmoded) understanding of gender within some parts of the armed forces. Improvements in the experiences of women personnel are necessary for full operational effectiveness, and rest on both practical interventions, and wider cultural shifts. We are optimistic that both are possible. Evidence suggests that visible leadership at all rank levels is necessary. Also that the UK itself has a role to play in leading on this issue at NATO and by improving engagement here could further benefit from existing lesson sharing among allies on overcoming obstacles to the better integration of women.

- **Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges in the armed forces?**

Women in the armed forces can face additional challenges not present for their male colleagues. Anecdotal evidence abounds that although many women enjoy successful and productive careers within the UK armed forces, the armed forces as a whole are failing to maximise on the potential brought by all personnel. Despite evidence for the enhanced operational effectiveness that their inclusion brings, there remains an entrenched scepticism within some elements of the armed forces about their contribution. Challenges which follow include: 'tokenism' and the visibility on their performance which this brings; requirements on the relatively small numbers of women across units and services to manage the balancing of military career and personal lives in ways not expected by their male colleagues; unacceptably high rates of sexualised harassment and gender-based violence within units; a complaints system which although improved needs to have the confidence of those seeking justice for harassment and abuse; and an entrenched culture of gender remaining in some parts of the armed forces which cannot see past an outmoded gendered binary ascribing specific characteristics to men and women, and then valuing them differently. An armed force where misogyny, sexism (including that masquerading as humour) and gender-based harassment are viewed as a necessary component of robust military capability, will be operationally unfit to meet the security challenges of the 21st century.

We note the very slow pace of change towards the wider inclusion of women in the UK armed forces, and the differential distribution of women within each armed force.<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Woodward, R. and Duncanson, C. (2016) Gendered divisions of military labour in the British armed forces. *Defence Studies* 16 (3): 205-228.

positive experience of the increased proportion of women in corps which became fully inclusive in 1998 is instructive for future policy interventions. Put simply: listen to the experiences of women personnel.

*Recommendations:*

1. We note the paucity of research on the experiences of women in the armed forces, across the three services and across ranks. There is a significant evidence gap on the experiences of women, from reliable, rigorous research conducted by independent agencies. Any policy evolutions need to attend to this as a matter of priority.
2. Outmoded attitudes towards women personnel are a serious failing in a 21st century armed force. Leaders at all levels, including Senior NCOs, need to prioritise exploration with appropriately qualified (civilian) agencies of strategies to inculcate cultural changes, away from binaries based on gendered inequalities and all that follows from these.
  - **What about female BAME personnel?**

The evidence gap shaping policies on women's military participation is particularly stark around the experiences of women of colour in the UK armed forces. Recognition of the ways in which inequalities based on race and gender intersect suggests both that women of colour may experience discrimination in different ways from their white female colleagues, and that the limits that this imposes on their reaching their full potential is ultimately problematic for the full operational effectiveness of the armed forces. We note also that the in-service experiences of women of colour from Commonwealth backgrounds may be different to those of UK-born BAME female personnel.

*Recommendation:*

1. Detailed and thorough research on the experiences of women of colour in the UK armed forces is required as a matter of urgency.
  - **Are the Government and MoD doing enough to address these challenges? What more could be done? How effective are their strategies/initiatives?**

The unique challenges facing female personnel across NATO forces have been recognised by NATO through the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives (est. 1976) which meets annually and collates national reports on the integration of women. This provides an important opportunity for the sharing of best practice in supporting women in the armed forces. In the most recent cross-national comparison of NATO allies

compiled by the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives the UK has failed to make a submission on its own position, limiting the value of the data for identifying patterns and trends at a UK level but also between allies across years. While the UK has sent a delegate to the annual conference, there is little consistency on who is sent in terms of both seniority and location within government. For example, in 2017 the FCO represented the UK. This limits the opportunities for lessons to be fed back to the MoD from NATO allies on shared challenges and overcoming barriers to women's better integration. While the UK took a leading role on the committee in its early years, it has not chaired the committee since 1993. An active role on the executive committee provides an opportunity not only for the UK to take a leadership role on this issue but also for deeper engagement with the issues concerning the status of women at a NATO level<sup>2</sup>.

*Recommendations:*

1. The MoD should report annually in a consistent manner on the status of women in UK armed forces as requested by the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives to facilitate lesson sharing among allies.
2. The MoD should send a senior delegate to represent the UK at the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives annual conference in line with other NATO allies, for example, this could be the Director of Diversity and Inclusion.
3. The UK should more actively engage with the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives beyond sending an annual delegate, it should seek to actively support the executive committee through putting a candidate forward for Chair.
  - **Do female reservists face unique and/or additional challenges in the armed forces? Are they similar to those faced by regular female service personnel?**

The proportion of women in the Reserves (across the three armed forces) is higher than that across the regular forces, indicating that the Reserves offers many women the opportunity to combine military participation with a civilian career. Research suggests that the FR20 reforms underestimated the practicalities of the complex lives of Reservists, and the unpaid additional work that they undertake. The maintenance of an operational reserve is contingent on recognition of this.

- **Why do female service personnel choose to leave the armed forces? Are the reasons different to why men leave the armed forces?**

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, K. A. M., Hurley, M. and Gil Ruiz, J. I. (2019) *NATO, gender and the military: Women organising from within, NATO, Gender and the Military: Women Organising from Within*. doi: 10.4324/9780429952074.

A number of factors that affect the wellbeing, readiness, and effectiveness of female service personnel influence their choice to leave the armed forces. Individual and structural discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, physical appearance, or assigned military duties create a negative perception of female service personnel and a toxic work environment that has a negative impact on their willingness to continue their service. Moreover, concerns about equal opportunity-related aspects, including career progression, mentorship, promotion rates, and under-representation across ranks determine female service personnel to leave early the armed forces. The prevalence of cultural attitudes based on traditional gender roles and status of female service personnel, inadequate investigation of inappropriate behaviour as evidenced by the increasing number of complaints, and experiences of unfair and unequal treatment reduce the willingness of female personnel to continue their service.

Unlike their male peers, female service personnel experience more work-life balance difficulties. Very often they bear most of the responsibility for the family, which exposes them to the dual stress of military service and family-related concerns. Increasing the motivation of female service personnel to continue their service depends on addressing key concerns such as shifting patterns of working hours, uncertainty of schedule, frequency and length of relocation and overseas deployment, elevated distress regarding managing split or single-parent families, and family planning such a pregnancy and childcare responsibilities, especially caring for children who have greater emotional, healthcare, or academic needs.

*Recommendation:*

1. Research on the experiences of families and, especially children of female service personnel both during and in the aftermath of their deployment, is currently limited. A greater interest in the impact of deployment and post-deployment on families and wider social networks of female military personnel would help the armed forces to ease the compatibility between family life and military service. This in turn would lead to higher retention rates and eventually encourage female service personnel to compete for, hold, and be appointed to senior positions, which can only benefit the armed forces in the long run.
- **How easy is it in practice for female service personnel to complain? What are the issues encouraging or hindering female personnel from complaining?**

Despite improvements in the complaints system, the institutional culture of the armed forces continues to prevent female service personnel from reporting inappropriate behaviour, including but not limited to bullying, discrimination, harassment, denial of rights, physical or verbal abuse. Due to a predominance of male figures within the senior ranks which leads to power differentials across organisational levels, female service personnel refrain from complaining because they feel that their experiences may not be believed or sufficiently understood by their male superiors. In addition, fear of marginalisation, concerns about career's prospects, and distress for their overall personal and professional image hinder female service personnel from complaining about inappropriate behaviour. Failing to address the reluctance of female service personnel to complain has serious consequences for the internal and external image of the armed forces thus impacting a range of issues, including retention, future recruitment, and the armed forces' overall management, training and preparations for deployment.

*Recommendations:*

1. Female service personnel would be encouraged to complain if the MoD takes further steps into integrating more women in senior roles, including the development of quantitative targets for the advancement of women to senior positions, a measure considered within other armed forces.<sup>3</sup> Quantitative targets allow for a greater pool of candidates and lead to the selection and appointment of high quality personnel, and particularly high quality female military personnel.
2. Greater emphasis should be placed on prevention of inappropriate behaviour from the early stages of military training, which would reduce the number of offences and encourage female military personnel to come forward with their complaints. Learning from the good practices of other armed forces, human and material resources should be invested in instructional meetings and interactive workshops that raise awareness about and the effects of inappropriate behaviour in the armed forces.<sup>4</sup> The development and dissemination of informational campaigns about the individual and organisational impact of inappropriate behaviour (videos, billboards, posters) would contribute to the de-stigmatisation of the process of filing a complaint.

- **What are the issues faced by women veterans once they have left the services?**

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Israel Defence Forces. Sharvit Baruch, P. (2016) 'What is the Appropriate Model for Female Service in the IDF?' (Institute For National Security Studies, Tel Aviv).

<sup>4</sup> See for e.g. Jude, S. (2017) 'Israel's Military: Emotions, Violence, and the Limits of Dissent' (unpublished PhD Diss., Aberystwyth University, UK).

A number of the challenges that women veterans face when they leave military service are directly linked to the institutional culture of the armed forces itself. For example, the mental health consequences of gender-based harassment, discrimination, bullying, and abuse experienced while serving can be felt long after they transition to civilian life, and specialist support services for dealing with these impacts are severely lacking. Women veterans may be discouraged from accessing support when needed due to lack of confidence that they will be taken seriously. The endemic sexism and persistent tokenistic approach to inclusivity in the armed forces is also evident in veteran organisations and services, with the consequence that women veterans issues continue to be sidelined and poorly understood. More research is needed in order to adequately understand and address the gender-specific issues faced by women veterans<sup>5</sup>.

- **Are the needs of female veterans currently met by the available veteran services?**

Current service provision for women veterans is inadequate and difficult to access. Mental health and welfare support is largely provided by charities and other organisations, many of which offer little or no targeted support for those who have experienced sexual harassment or abuse while in the armed forces. Veteran organisations and services raise many of the same issues faced by women in the armed forces itself, and often represent highly exclusionary spaces for women. Many organisations which provide veteran services are both run and dominated by men, and women veterans report that incidents of bullying, harassment, and misogyny, alongside an institutional culture that prioritises masculine brotherhood and camaraderie, continue to pervade these services and spaces. Women veterans who have experienced bullying, discrimination, and physical or verbal abuse in the armed forces can feel unable to seek support for these issues due to lack of female representation in veteran services. Past experiences of these issues not being taken seriously or addressed in a robust manner during their service can also deter women from seeking support after they have left<sup>6</sup>.

*Recommendation:*

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<sup>5</sup> The findings referred to here were generated as part of 'Women Warriors' (2019), a collaborative theatre and research project between Workie Ticket Theatre CIC, Dr Alice Cree (Newcastle University), and women veterans in the North East of England. This involved six months of participatory work with a group of women veterans who had been both full-time and reservist. Findings from this work will be published in 2021. See also important findings in this area by 'Salute Her', a North East based charity doing valuable work to raise awareness of women veterans' issues. Findings from their research can be accessed at <https://www.forward-assist.com/salute-her-research>.

<sup>6</sup> 'Women Warriors' (2019). See above note.

1. Provision of more targeted services for women veterans would demonstrate that their military service is valued, and would increase uptake of support provisions among this group. Services should include well-publicised and easy-to-access support for those who have had traumatic experiences such as sexual harassment, assault, and discrimination. Emphasis should be placed on making service users feel that they are taken seriously and that their problems and concerns matter. Greater female representation in the day-to-day running of veteran services would make them more inclusive to women.

*29th January 2020*