

## Written evidence submitted by the Naval Families Federation

### *The Naval Families Federation*

The Naval Families Federation speaks up for serving members of the Royal Navy (RN) and Royal Marines and their families. We represent their views and experiences to policymakers. We meet regularly with the Royal Navy's Chain of Command, Government Ministers, Other Government Departments and other key stakeholders. We also support appropriate and relevant research, and undertake advocacy for serving people and their families when they experience disadvantage compared to the general population, or face issues that cannot be resolved through existing channels.

The evidence offered below is the NFF's perspective on the issues raised, based on feedback from serving people and their families. We have omitted questions addressed by the consultation where we have insufficient evidence to comment, or where the questions relate to Veterans, as our work is focused on the currently serving population and their families.

### *Additional challenges faced by women in the Armed Forces and reasons for leaving*

It is our view that not nearly enough is known about the experiences of women in the UK Armed Forces, in contrast to the extensive body of material relating to men's experiences. We would welcome more relevant and detailed research to understand better the issues faced by women. There also needs to be much greater understanding of the impact of being part of a dual-serving couple.

### *Harmony and separation*

There is an apparent disconnect between the way the RN currently operates and the aspirations that many women (and indeed men) have for modern family life. The current harmony guidelines mean that RN personnel spend a disproportionate amount of time away from home, compared to the other two Services. The NFF has recently written to the Chief of Defence People about this matter. 660 days away in a 3-year period is an excessive amount of time for a serving person to be away from home, and particularly for women wishing to start a family or to remain in service after childbirth. Furthermore, research shows that this amount of separation is damaging to couple relationships<sup>1</sup> (Keeling et al, 2015).

The harmony guidelines were established over 20 years ago. Now, in this increasingly tri-Service, modern era, the MOD generally directs and leads policy on all aspects of family life and allowances (e.g., The Families Strategy, the Future Accommodation Model and Wraparound Childcare), recognising that the contribution of the family unit is vital to the effectiveness of the nation's Armed Forces. It is difficult to understand why harmony would not be addressed at MOD level, especially given the effect it has on dual serving partners' ability to remain in the Service. The guidelines that underpin harmony need to be adjusted, and the RN needs to be adequately resourced to allow this to happen.

The FAMCAS reflects RN families' feelings about the amount of separation experienced. Preliminary findings from recent research carried out on behalf of Service Children in State Schools (SCISS) in

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Keeling, Simon Wessely, Christopher Dandeker, Norman Jones & Nicola T. Fear (2015) Relationship Difficulties Among U.K. Military Personnel: Impact of Sociodemographic, Military, and Deployment-Related Factors, *Marriage & Family Review*, 51:3, 275-303, DOI: 10.1080/01494929.2015.1031425

England show that supporting children with separation from their serving parent was the biggest challenge reported in relation to Armed Forces' families. We now know much more about the importance of attachment between a parent and child for the child's future health and wider outcomes than we did twenty years ago, when the harmony guidelines were set. It is not right that the children of RN families should be placed at a disadvantage to children from the other Services.

### *Cultural expectations*

There is ongoing social and cultural pressure for women to be present at home as mothers. The same degree of stigma does not apply to men who work away from home; they are viewed as 'the provider'. It is common for women's careers to be subjugated to those of male partners. This is particularly the case in the Armed Forces, where many women are in dual-serving partnerships with men. Furthermore, women typically shoulder more domestic duties (an overall average of 60% more unpaid work than men (ONS, 2016))<sup>2</sup>, and more 'emotional labour'<sup>3</sup> (Robertson et al, 2019) within families than male partners.

### *Childcare*

Childcare is not a women's issue; it is an issue for all parents and their employers. Yet because, even today (because of legacy systems), women predominantly take on the main responsibility for raising children in our society, any attempt to increase the proportion of serving women will need to consider how the children of the RN are cared for. The need, and/or desire, to care for children affects all parents, but the evidence shows that it disproportionately affects women's ability to return to paid employment after maternity leave. Mothers with young children have the lowest employment levels of all parents with dependent children at 65.1%. In comparison, the employment rate of fathers with children aged three or four is 93.2%.<sup>4</sup>

The retention figures for Servicewomen after pregnancy have not been published since the last UK Armed Forces Maternity report in 2012, and are not included in the UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics<sup>5</sup>. This needs to be addressed.

Access to high quality, flexible, affordable childcare is not the only issue holding back women in the RN, but it makes a huge difference to their ability to take on challenging roles and to progress to higher rate/rank. Understandably, many women within the RN are reluctant to champion the cause of childcare, in case this reinforces the notion that it is a 'women's issue'. The results of the NFF's recent survey on Childcare can be found here: <https://nff.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NFF-Childcare-Report-2021.pdf>

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<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics: Women shoulder the responsibility of 'unpaid work', 2016. Accessed 26 January 2021 from

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/womenshouldtheresponsibilityofunpaidwork/2016-11-10>

<sup>3</sup> Robertson, L. G., Anderson, T. L., Hall, M. E. L., & Kim, C. L. (2019). Mothers and Mental Labor: A Phenomenological Focus Group Study of Family-Related Thinking Work. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 43(2), 184–200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319825581>

<sup>4</sup> Office for National Statistics (2017). More mothers with young children working full-time. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/moremotherswithyoungchildrenworkingfulltime/2017-09-26>

<sup>5</sup> UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 April 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2020/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-1-april-2020#gender-1>

*Inclusion*

Women in the UK are subjected to an accumulation of ‘micro-aggressions<sup>6</sup>’ (apparently benign and unconscious forms of sexism, racism and heterosexism) in daily life, and the context of the Service workplace is no exception. Common examples might be referring to ‘crewing’ or ‘workforce’ as ‘manpower’, using the term ‘females’ (which some women consider pejorative, as it could represent any species and reduces a woman to her reproductive abilities) instead of ‘women’, difficulties getting hold of uniform items which a man would have no problems obtaining, and assumptions based on gender. Such situations do not usually arise with malicious intent, but can reinforce a sense of being undervalued and out of place.

***Female BAME personnel***

There is a lack of evidence about the experiences of BAME women. There is huge diversity of background, culture and experience amongst BAME women in the Armed Forces, who may individually find their identities and lives impacted by intersecting systems of privilege and oppression. These unique experiences and challenges need to be better understood and evidenced.

***Systemic issues***

Although the RN has made considerable, and laudable, progress towards gender equality in recent years (particularly in opening all roles to women, initiatives to recruit more women and to promote them fairly), it still retains many of its historical patriarchal characteristics and assumptions, often (but not always) at an unconscious level. The RN has a long history of men serving at sea, being supported at home by women, and this model is the experience of its senior leadership. It is almost a systemic assumption that sailors and Royal Marines will have their childcare and domestic responsibilities taken care of by a (usually female) non-serving partner, whose income is discretionary and not central to the family’s economic stability. Many serving women are in long-term partnerships with other serving people. Systemic change to patriarchal systems takes time and consistent application of effort to be delivered.

***Lack of representation at senior levels***

There is a legacy lack of representation at senior ranks of officers who have grappled personally with the practical and emotional considerations of equal or solo parenting. The importance of relatable female role models to inspire, guide and model behaviours and skills (‘you can’t be what you can’t see’) is well understood within the Service. Currently there is a talent drain of very capable, high calibre women, with potential to aspire to the highest levels. While there is certainly a willingness to change things, the majority of those in senior leadership and at Board level do not, and never have had, ‘skin in the game’ of combining maternity (or indeed ‘hands on’ fatherhood) with an ambitious and lasting military career. It is those people with lived experience who truly understand the complexity of the challenges, and need to be offering guidance at Board level. Given the difficulties the RN has in ‘growing its own’, perhaps insights could be offered from other nations’ Armed Forces who are further ahead with this agenda.

***Women in the margin***


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<sup>6</sup> Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Social Service Review, Vol. 85, No. 3 (September 2011), pp. 519-521 Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/663007>

To increase the numbers of women in the RN, there will need to be an increase in funding. For several reasons, including maternity, there are always more women than men in the 'margin' (the proportion of the workforce who are not fully deployable to front-line units at a given moment). Put simply, in the current construct, it is cheaper to employ men in the Armed Forces than it is to employ women. There is no suggestion that this unpalatable truth is driving behaviour in recruiting or career management, but it is a factor that will need to be addressed if increasing the number of serving women is genuinely a priority for Defence. More resource will be needed to allow more people to be in the margin. The current focus is on military hardware but there is no work-home balance to be had in the RN. The overworked and fatigued muscles of the workforce are stretched too tightly over the bones of the equipment. People need to become a priority again if the gender balance is to be addressed.

### ***Lack of shore-side roles***

To crew fully its operational units and reduce gapping, the RN has undertaken programme HECATE, which aims to deliver more people to ships and to the front line, by removing shore-based posts and transferring the liability to sea. The shore-based review that (necessarily) accompanied this programme may have the unintended consequence of making service in the RN even less attractive to women. It has involved deleting many shore-based posts which may have appealed to women wishing to maximise the amount of time they are present at home for children. The 'offer' to new recruits will be clearer and more transparent because of programme Hecate, but whether it appeals to women remains to be seen.

Over the past two decades, many of the shore-based roles that allowed women (and men) to strike a more reasonable balance between service away at sea and home-life, have been deleted or civilianised in 'efficiency savings'. It is understood that the RN must prioritise operational front-line roles to deliver its taskings on behalf of HM Government, but to maintain an acceptable balance for the modern family between time away and time at home, some shore-based roles still need to exist. The erosion of alternative roles to sea-going posts for people who wish to be involved parents during the early part of their children's lives is likely to have an impact on the retention of women, and many men. The provision of uniformed shore-based roles requires additional resource which is currently unavailable. Interestingly, the branches which are most successful in recruiting and retaining women (Writer Logisticians and Medical) have a much better balance between deployed time and shore time than many other branches. It is understood that Flexible Working may be an option for some individuals, but there is no Flexible Working at sea or on the front line, which is where the RN's workforce predominantly operates.

### ***The Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Act (2010)***

The introduction of Flexible Service is welcomed. However, flexible working is only available where the exigencies of the Service allow. Our understanding is that take-up is not widespread among women or men. It would be helpful to see the rates of application and approval for these arrangements published across all three Services, along with their impact. It would also be helpful to understand more about whether applying for such measures has any impact on career progression and promotion prospects, about how they work in practice, and about perceptions of the measures among serving people. There needs to be more transparency about the effects of requesting Flexible Service on career progression, to enable serving people to have confidence about their choices. Publishing data on the uptake and success of Flexible Service would also assist potential applicants to the Royal Navy, who need to have a realistic understanding of what this provision can offer in practice.

### ***No shortcuts***

We are aware that there have been discussions within Defence about introducing additional leadership and development training (not presented as being exclusively for women, but intended to target them) to assist women with advancement to higher rank. It is our perception that the RN has many women in its workforce who are already highly skilled leaders, who do not require further training. Rather, they need the systemic barriers to their continued service to be addressed.

### ***Reserve service***

In contrast to the Regular Royal Navy, which only has 9.8% women (a figure that has not improved over the 30 years since women began to serve at sea), 14.7% of the Maritime Reserve are women<sup>7</sup>. It would be potentially useful to explore the reasons why women find reserve service more attractive. From the feedback we receive from serving women, we suggest that it may be to do with work-life balance and time away. The RAF is recruiting and retaining women at a higher rate, with 14.8% female regulars and 23.6% female reserves. It is suggested that one significant contributory factor might be that women in the RAF have less separation from their loved ones and families because of the differences in Harmony guidelines across the Armed Forces.

### ***Service complaints***

It has been noted that women are over-represented in the complaints system and are more likely to make bullying or harassment complaints. This may be explained by the existence of more incidences of bullying or harassment, or it may be that women regard the complaints system as a 'safe space' through which issues can be addressed.

It is our observation that women may experience a kind of 'performance pressure', where they do not always feel liberated to speak up 'in the moment' because of their minority status and because the culture of the Armed Forces encourages a stoic approach to difficulties. Women do not wish to be regarded as easily offended, or to reinforce any existing stereotypes (for example, being 'sensitive'), and may find it difficult or impossible to challenge injustice or inappropriate behaviour on the spot. Additionally, too often men do not take the lead as allies to notice and 'call out' inappropriate behaviour by other men.

### ***Transition to civilian life***

Women with young children may find it harder to take full advantage of resettlement opportunities and may benefit from an extended period of support to re-enter the workforce. Many women have partners who are also serving, and are effectively operating as lone parents while their serving people are away, which reduces their opportunities to fully focus on their future career development.

29 January 2021

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<sup>7</sup> UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 April 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2020/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-1-april-2020#gender-1> accessed 29 January 2021