

Written evidence submitted by Agora

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

Agora describes itself as the UK's open forum for foreign policy. We provide a platform for debate and the furthering of knowledge in a number of areas of international affairs policy. Two of our most active research programmes are our Defence & Security and our Identities programmes, both of which cover issues relevant to this inquiry. Agora recently conducted a multinational policy crafting exercise helping to define a feminist foreign policy for the 2020s, along with our partners in Germany, France, Austria, and Switzerland. For our submission, we shared the terms of reference of this call for evidence with those who were active in that project, asking them to share their expertise with us. Below is the collected and edited response.

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Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges in the armed forces? What about BAME personnel? Are the Government and MoD doing enough to address these challenges? How effective are their strategies/initiatives? What more could be done?

Women, as well as BAME and LGBT individuals, often face discrimination in the armed forces. This can take the form of bullying, sexual harassment, or violence.

Usually, discrimination faced in the armed forces arises within the context of shared norms of the military, which define what it means to be a member of the army and what behaviour is considered accepted or desirable. There is a prevailing understanding of masculinity's central role in these norms, meaning that women and those from LGBT or BAME communities often face unique challenges.

These issues logically apply to women in the armed forces regardless of whether they are reservists or regular service personnel.

Whilst recruitment into the British armed forces has become steadily more diverse, adding more women or persons from LGBT or BAME communities alone will not address the discrimination they sometimes face, since this is largely a problem of institutional culture. Although increased diversity will bring in new traditions of how tied military norms are to masculinity, literature in the past few years has shown that these persons actually tend to adopt the dominant norms of military masculinity. Those facing challenges are hence often those who do not comply with the existing norms on what a member of the armed forces is believed to look or behave like.

The US Army has very recently updated its rules on grooming and appearance for service personnel, in recognition of the importance of respecting diversity to a greater degree than had traditionally been the case. The Committee and MoD would do well to monitor the progress of this and similar changes.

Recommendations:

- Continue to promote a more progressive, diverse hiring policy
- Explore measures to shape alternative norms within the military, particularly amongst those in leadership roles, through focused training or other sessions, to deliver deeper and longer-term cultural and institutional change.
- Review and, where appropriate, update policies which unnecessarily reinforce narrow stereotypes, such as those prescribing a particular appearance.

How easy is it in practice for female service personnel to complain? What are the issues encouraging or hindering female personnel from complaining?

There are a number of barriers to female service personnel making complaints.

One issue is confidentiality. Word travels fast, particularly in the environment of the armed forces where privacy is rare. A second is that reporting issues, particularly those connected with bullying or harassment, can be perceived as a sign of weakness and induce further bullying or harassment while investigations are ongoing (particularly if the person making the complaint stays in position during this time, as is common). This can be exacerbated if the complaint is not upheld or does not lead to action. A third, related, issue is that the reporter may feel they are jeopardising their career progression by being seen to challenge norms or drawing attention to themselves.

An additional factor to consider is that, due to their minority status within the military, women or BAME personnel may feel they have a weaker rapport with whoever they are reporting an issue to, or that the person dealing with their complaint does not understand their situation.

Recommendations:

- Appoint a person within each regiment or battalion with responsibility for hearing and reporting matters related to diversity, and with the remit to make recommendations. This person should be placed outside of the army hierarchy, to reduce the barriers to reporting, but trusted and taken seriously by those of all ranks.
- Review the safeguards to ensure that complaints of discrimination are treated seriously, confidentially, and fairly.

*2 February 2021*