

Written evidence submitted by The Royal British Legion

Defence Committee: Women in the Armed Forces Sub Inquiry

Summary of The Royal British Legion evidence, February 2021

1. Summary

- 1.1. Female veterans and personnel currently make up 10% of the Armed Forces and are a significant minority, with distinct experiences and needs within a unique environment. The Legion's response includes relevant evidence, including evidence from our services, anecdotal evidence from members of the Armed Forces community and published academic research.
- 1.2. Existing evidence demonstrates that the experiences and needs of women in the Armed Forces differ from their male counterparts. At present, research in this area is predominately international, with significant gaps in our understanding of the specific needs of female veterans and Serving personnel in the UK. However, the UK research base and Legion evidence indicate areas where women in the Armed Forces would benefit from tailored support and suggests topics for further research.

2. Key findings by policy area

- 2.1. The RBL's evidence is based on analysis of a sample of casework carried out by the RBL, a focus group of female veterans and existing published literature. It must be noted throughout that UK published literature on female personnel and veterans' experience is scarce in many areas. Key findings in our evidence include the following:

2.2. Housing

- 2.2.1. Female veterans face the same barriers to housing that male veterans may face. However international literature suggests that female veterans have different needs to their male counterparts and tend to focus on female veterans who suffered sexual trauma whilst in Service.ⁱ The most common accommodation inquiries received by the RBL from female members of the Armed Forces Community were eviction, temporary accommodation and finding new accommodation, and being unable to sustain accommodation due to low/lack of income. Anecdotally, female veterans presented less often as being street homeless, compared to male veterans, however, accommodation can be more precarious due to other factors such as poor mental and physical health, domestic violence, and financial constraints from being sole carers for children or low incomes.

2.3. Finance and Debt

- 2.3.1. Female veterans present to the RBL with similar issues as their male

counterparts when it comes to debt, with older female veterans requiring annuities to support them. However, again, there are unique or exacerbated factors. For women who served in the Armed Forces before 1975, there was no automatic entitlement to an occupational pension. However, female veterans had to leave the forces upon marriage until the 1970's and up until the 1990's they had to leave Service when pregnant. These policies, for female veterans who served during this period, could have meant that their ability to make pension contributions were curtailed resulting in no entitlement to an occupational pension in old age.

2.4. Employment

2.4.1. UK female veterans are less likely to be employed (76%) than male service leavers (87%) and, more likely to be economically inactive (18%) compared with males (7%).ⁱⁱ 2019 research found that almost a quarter (22%) of female Service leavers surveyed were not employed, but the majority (68%) stated that they would like to be in work.ⁱⁱⁱ The Legion's 2014 Household Survey of the ex-Service Community identified female veterans as a specific group who may benefit from employment support as they tend to be less confident in their skills.^{iv} While both male and female Service leavers can find translating military skills and experience into the civilian job market challenging, findings suggest that female veterans may be more likely than their male counterparts to underestimate their suitability for roles. Focus group evidence also suggests that current resettlement packages and accompanying support are not always consistent. One participant recalled being discouraged from attending training opportunities provided during resettlement.

2.5. Sexual Harassment and Abuse

2.5.1. Almost 90% of personnel report being exposed to sexual jokes and/or stories in the preceding 12 months,^v with Servicewomen more likely to report being offended by such comments.^{vi} The likelihood of experiencing targeted sexualised behaviour increased the more junior in rank personnel were.^{vii} Focus group participants suggested that casual sexism was a widespread and expected part of military life for female personnel, though it was felt that this had improved in recent decades, yet some participants did not identify with being 'victimised' by gendered or sexual. Instead, they considered this to be 'banter' and a levelling method of communication in a unique environment where everyone was targeted based on their characteristics. However, participants were unanimous in stating that most female personnel were reluctant to directly challenge sexist remarks as this would likely result in an escalation of the situation, and in some cases intensified abusive comments.

2.5.2. Similarly, it was a repeated suggestion through our focus group that rape and sexual assault experienced by female personnel was underreported although present in research findings.^{viii} It was suggested that a significant barrier to reporting was the military process, where a Commanding Officer would be notified, and the majority of senior personnel would likely know about the allegation.

2.6. Maternity and Family Life

2.6.1. Having (or intending to have) children is the most commonly reported reason for women leaving Service in the UK earlier in their military career than planned.^{ix} Some women in-Service find it challenging to balance their roles and careers in

the military with family life. Additional difficulties with childcare are encountered by single women in the military with children and women in dual-serving partnerships.^x

2.7. Health

2.7.1. As of 2018, women are now able to serve in all roles including infantry, Royal Marines and SAS, meaning that they face the same risks as their male counterparts, especially with regards to injury and illness. Similarly, standard equipment are designed to suit the male physique yet issued to both genders as roles align, yet women are generally shorter than men and a standard bergen for example is often too long, placing extra pressure on the spine and pelvis and causing musco-skeletal injuries.^{xi}

2.7.2. The impact of injury treatment also differs between genders. For example, inflammatory response (by the body) to trauma exhibited by male personnel is different for women.^{xii} In mental health, rates of PTSD appear to remain consistent between genders, however, deployed women may be less likely to perceive that they were members of a cohesive unit and were more likely than men to report symptoms of common mental disorders or seek support.^{xiii}^{xiv} The unique impact of Service on female personnel is however not significantly recognised within existing military compensation schemes.

2.7.3. Lastly, female Serving personnel drink at more harmful levels than women in the general population. Female Service personnel are around five times more likely than women in the general population to be alcohol dependent (5% vs 1%).^{xv} Fear et al have similarly found that 49% of women in the UK Armed Forces had an AUDIT score of 8 or above (defined as hazardous drinking and considered by the World Health Organisation to be harmful to health), higher than both men and women in the UK general population (38% and 16%).^{xvi}

3. Summary of Recommendations

3.1. Support recommendations

- In order to improve employment outcomes for female veterans, the Defence Transition Service should further consider tailored intervention strategies for female veterans approaching transition and during resettlement.
- The Legion recommends the provision on advice and signposting to support with finances as part of the transition package. For older female veterans, this should include tailored advice and support to ensure a decent standard of living in retirement.
- Data highlights the gendered impact of reported sexual offenses. UK Service personnel could benefit from an educational package around general and targeted sexual behaviours.

3.2. Research recommendations

- The Legion recommends analysis of the international research on female veterans

housing needs, including research into how female veterans are able to access and sustain housing. Findings should be considered to see if they can be applied to female veterans in the UK Armed Forces. Further commissioned research would add to this evidence base in the UK.

- The Legion has identified female Commonwealth Veterans as a group who would particularly benefit from greater understanding of their experiences as both women in the Armed Forces and their experience as Commonwealth recruits.
- Further research should be conducted into the specific needs of female veterans during resettlement to enhance employment outcomes post Service. Research should also be undertaken into the experiences of female veterans who apply for and receive compensation.
- Research into the experiences of female personnel and veterans reporting sexual offences, the specific needs of female veterans during maternity and in balancing Service and family life would be useful in identifying any areas for improvement in support and processes.
- More research is needed into the mental health conditions experienced by Service personnel and whether they present differently in female personnel.

February 2021

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The Royal British Legion evidence submission, February 2021

1. About Us

1.1 The Royal British Legion is at the heart of a national network that supports our Armed Forces community through thick and thin – ensuring that their unique contribution is never forgotten. We were created as a unifying force for the military charity sector at the end of the First World War, and still remain one of the UK’s largest membership organisations. We are the largest welfare provider in the Armed Forces charity sector, helping veterans young and old transition into civilian life. We help with employment, financial issues and recovery, through to lifelong care and independent living. For more information on the work of the Royal British Legion please visit www.britishlegion.org.uk.

1.2 In 2019, the Legion responded to over 180,000 requests for support¹, and we have continued to support Veterans and their families via the Legion and Veterans Gateway Contact Centre services, which have remained open throughout the pandemic.

1.3 The Legion is one of the 25 Service Charities which comprise Cobseo, the Confederation of Service Charities, Women’s cluster. Formed in 2019, the cluster seeks to establish a better understanding of the needs of UK female veterans, including identification of research gaps in this area. In 2020 the cluster commissioned Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), to conduct a scoping study into the needs of female veterans, the results of which will be published in 2021.

2.0 General Comments

2.1 The Legion welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Defence Select Committee’s sub inquiry. As the largest welfare provider in the Armed Forces charity sector, the Legion seeks to represent the unique needs of the Armed Forces community that we support and for whom we advocate. The majority of the Legion’s welfare support is provided to veterans who have left Service and our submission to this inquiry highlights key issues affecting this cohort of female veterans as well as focusing on areas of emerging concern for female veterans.

¹ The Royal British Legion [Annual Report and Accounts Year Ended 30 September 2019](#) p.13, (2019)

2.2 Our response highlights relevant evidence, including evidence from our services, anecdotal evidence from members of the Armed Forces community and published academic research and literature. To inform our response, we undertook a focus group in January 2021 of female veterans of working age who are now in employment post-Service. The focus group included tri service representation and variation in rank across the participants. This group provided anecdotal evidence which we have considered as indicative of some of the potential systemic issues that could be experienced by women both in-Service and as veterans.

2.3 Additionally, we have looked at our welfare incident records to highlight the key issues faced by female ex-Service personnel. Between March 2019 and March 2020, the Legion received 1600 enquiries for welfare support from female veterans. We reviewed a random sample of these cases from across all areas of our welfare support services. We have selected data prior to the impact of COVID-19 so as to understand the issues affecting female veterans in what may be considered ordinary circumstances.

2.4 Further breakdown of these cases by category is possible, but limited due to the structure of the Legion's case management system which records needs in broad categories, often containing multiple other needs. These contacts with female veterans highlighted the following areas of interest:

- 661 inquiries for financial support: including housing, debts and essential household goods.
- 239 Benefits Debt and Money Advice inquiries: these were concerned with benefit appeals, debt advice and support with bankruptcy.
- 151 cases of multiple needs: these included, accommodation, employment and support with mental health conditions.
- 100 enquiries from female veterans for support with appealing Armed Forces Compensation and War Disablement Pension Decisions: some of these requests consisted of reconsiderations for worsening conditions or making first time applications to the scheme.

2.5 Due to time constraints a cross section of 180 cases were reviewed to try and understand the needs and most common areas of support provided to female veterans.

3.0 Housing

3.1 There is a large volume of literature and research on the UK Armed Forces and housing, including on the barriers the community face to accessing and sustaining accommodation. Internationally however, there is an emerging literature on the specific housing needs of female veterans. These studies recognise that female veterans have different needs to their male counterparts and tend to focus on female veterans who suffered sexual trauma whilst in Service.² The Legion's

² [Kim et al, *Safer Housing for Homeless Women Veterans* J Am Acad Psychiatry Law](#) . 2019 Aug;47(3):299-306. doi: 10.29158/JAAPL.003854-19. Epub 2019 Jun 11. (2019)

evidence, to some extent, confirms that female veterans housing needs are different and they often experience other factors, such as domestic violence and being single parents, which may mean that they struggle to find secure accommodation.

3.2 Of the inquiries that the Legion received for welfare support from female veterans, only 36 explicitly stated that the need was accommodation. However, due to limitations of interrogating the case management system and also how the female veteran articulated their problem at first contact, there were many more female veterans who approached us with accommodation needs beyond this 36. For example, there were cases of veterans seeking mental health support or financial support who were also in need of housing advice, or were homeless and relying on friends and family for short term accommodation. A detailed look at cases found several cases recorded as 'financial support', 'multiple needs' and 'priority debts' which also involved an issue with accommodation. This is not unusual, many requests for support are as a result of veterans and their families experiencing one main problem or need, which can become worse and impact on other areas of their lives, including accommodation.

3.3 The most common accommodation inquiries from this group were eviction, temporary accommodation and finding new accommodation, and being unable to sustain accommodation due to low/lack of income. Anecdotally, Legion welfare staff report that female veterans presented less often as being street homeless, compared to male veterans. They had accommodation but this was more precarious due to other factors such as poor mental and physical health and domestic violence, and as they were likely to be the sole carers for children and struggled on low incomes, manifesting in rent arrears or eviction notices.

3.4 Whilst numbers of female veterans contacting us from non-UK backgrounds were small, they were present. An Anglia Ruskin University report on the needs of Commonwealth Veterans notes that 'issues of immigration, settlement and visas³ have a considerable impact on Commonwealth Personnel and families especially due to recent increases in the costs of the application process. The financial pressures this process creates can in turn lead to additional burdens in terms of debt, employment, housing and marital issues, which make transition to civilian life for Commonwealth Service Personnel and their families exceptionally and unnecessarily difficult.'⁴ For female Commonwealth veterans, this can be compounded by domestic violence⁵ or a loss of a support network as they are no longer in Service and their family networks are overseas. **More work needs to be done to understand the needs of Commonwealth Veterans, but for the female veterans who make up this cohort in this group special attention should be paid to their experiences as both women in the Armed Forces and how this is compounded by their status as Commonwealth recruits.**

³ The Legion has been campaigning on this issue for further information please see [Commonwealth visa fees](#).

⁴ Pearson, C, and [Caddick, N, Meeting the Needs of Commonwealth Personnel and Families: A Map of Service Provision](#) p.5, (2018)

⁵ Ibid

3.5 For female veterans, especially those who present with comorbid health and welfare issues, or who have intersectionality with other minority characteristics, the support they receive in transition should focus on ensuring that they are able to find adequate and sustainable accommodation. **The Legion would recommend that the Defence Transition Service further explore intervention strategies to ensure that female veterans approaching transition are provided with tailored and gender specific points of access.**

3.6 As mentioned in preceding paragraphs, whilst there is evidence that female veterans experience accommodation issues and seek support for them, any unique or exacerbated barriers and experience are poorly understood or explored in published literature. **The Legion believes that an analysis of the international research on female veterans housing needs should be undertaken to find out if any recommendations can be applied and adapted to female veterans. This should also sit alongside new commissioned research into how female veterans are able to access and sustain housing.**

4.0 Finance and Debt

4.1 As with housing, and a common theme when discussing this cohort, specific research is lacking on the financial needs of Servicewomen and female veterans in the UK. Data from Legion welfare services indicates that female veterans present with similar issues to their male counterparts, such as rent arrears and council tax or utility arrears. While these issues may not be unique to female veterans, they speak to overall financial capability issues within the Armed Forces.

4.2 The Legion's services show that financial support for female veterans is varied and spread across the age spectrum. Older female veterans present more frequently requiring annuities (regular payments to make ends meet in old age). Whilst the Legion does not provide these payments directly, we administer them on behalf of organisations such as the Army Benevolent Fund and regimental associations such as the Women's Royal Army Corps.

4.3 Female veterans of state retirement age struggling financially is not unusual. Despite changes to the state pension women still receive £7 less than men per week.⁶ For women who served in the Armed Forces this may be exacerbated. For all veterans serving before 1975, there was no automatic entitlement to an occupational pension. However, female veterans had to leave the forces upon marriage until the 1970's and up until the 1990's they had to leave Service when pregnant.⁷ These policies, for female veterans who served during this period, would have meant that their ability to make pension contributions were curtailed resulting in no entitlement to an occupational pension in old age.

⁶ Department for Work and Pensions, *DWP benefits statistics: August 2020*, (2020)

⁷ Female army veterans pushed into homelessness and destitution by 'abysmal' pension rules <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/women-army-corps-pension-pregnancy-marriage-remembrance-day-a9195501.html>) accessed 26/01/2021

4.4 Whilst there are a range of cohorts within the Armed Forces community who may struggle with aspects of financial capability⁸, female veterans are more likely to be economically inactive than their male contemporaries⁹ and combined with other factors that apply to both male and female veterans from their time in Service, such as never having to manage a household budget, they may be worse off than their civilian counterparts. **Financial education should be an integral part of the transition process as well as clear signposting on where to find support with finances. For older female veterans, tailored support and advice should be provided to ensure they are able to maintain a decent standard of living in retirement.**

5.0 Employment

5.1 Recent Ministry of Defence statistics show that in the UK female veterans are less likely to be employed (76%) than male service leavers (87%) and, more likely to be economically inactive (18%) compared with males (7%). A finding noted as consistent with higher economic inactivity for women compared with men in the general population, which is attributed to their family commitments.^{10 11}

5.2 Research carried out by Cranfield University and the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) in 2019 found that almost a quarter (22%) of female Service leavers surveyed were not employed, but the majority (68%) stated that they would like to be in work.¹² The Legion's 2014 *Household Survey of the ex-Service Community* identified female veterans as a specific group who may benefit from employment support as they tend to be less confident in their skills.¹³ While both male and female Service leavers can find translating military skills and experience into the civilian job market challenging, findings suggest that female veterans may be more likely than their male counterparts to underestimate their suitability for roles.¹⁴

5.3 Anecdotal evidence, referenced in our focus group, suggests that current resettlement packages and accompanying support are not always consistent. One participant recalled being discouraged from attending training opportunities provided during resettlement. Research indicates female veterans could benefit from having more tailored support for their employment needs during resettlement, particularly taking into account flexible working and especially in the case of women with caring responsibilities.¹⁵ **The Legion recommends further research is conducted into the specific needs of female veterans during resettlement and that female personnel have the option of tailored support during this period.**

⁸ The Royal British Legion, [Veterans Strategy Response](#), p.41 (2019)

⁹ MOD, [Annual population survey: UK armed forces veterans residing in Great Britain](#), (2019)

¹⁰ MOD, [Annual population survey: UK armed forces veterans residing in Great Britain](#), (2019)

¹¹ MOD, [Career Transition Partnership Annual Statistics: UK Regular Service Personnel Employment 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019](#), Pg 6, (2020)

¹² Cranfield University & Institute for Employment Studies (IES), [Female Service Leavers and Employment](#), Pg 57, (2019)

¹³ The Royal British Legion, [Household Survey of the ex-Service Community](#), Pg 81 (2014)

¹⁴ Cranfield University & Institute for Employment Studies (IES), [Female Service Leavers and Employment](#), (2019)

¹⁵ Ibid

6.0 Sexual Harassment and Abuse

- 6.1** There is currently minimal existing research exploring both the prevalence and impact of sexual harassment and abuse in female service personnel in the UK Armed Forces. Comparatively, a large body of research exists examining these issues in the United States.¹⁶
- 6.2** MOD findings from the British Army Sexual Harassment Report 2018 suggest a high prevalence of generalised sexual behaviours, with almost 90% of surveyed personnel reporting being exposed to sexual jokes and/or stories in the preceding 12 months.¹⁷ The report also notes that in most cases (64%) of targeted sexual behaviour, men were solely responsible for the behaviours; with the likelihood of experiencing targeted sexualised behaviour increasing the more junior in rank personnel were.¹⁸ Additionally, it was found that Servicewomen were more likely to report being offended by such comments.¹⁹ It was repeatedly discussed throughout our focus group that casual sexism experienced by female veterans was a widespread and expected part of military life for female personnel, though it was felt that this had improved in recent decades.
- 6.3** Some participants in our focus group did not identify with being 'victimised' by gendered or sexual comments from male personnel. Instead, they considered this to be 'banter' and a levelling method of communication in a unique environment where everyone was targeted based on their characteristics; meaning they did not feel *unfairly* targeted as women. One focus group participant mentioned she felt attempts to police low level general sexualised comments could be divisive and negatively affect cohesion. However, participants were unanimous in stating that most female personnel were reluctant to directly challenge sexist remarks as this would likely result in an escalation of the situation, and in some cases intensified abusive comments. **This suggests that UK Service personnel could benefit from an educational package around general and targeted sexual behaviours, including strengthening reporting channels and signposting to them.**
- 6.4** MOD data also suggests that Servicewomen in the British Army are more likely to report experiencing targeted sexual behaviours, including unwanted sexual touching, in the past 12 months than their male colleagues.²⁰ It was a repeated suggestion through our focus group that rape and sexual assault experienced by female personnel was underreported. It was suggested that a significant barrier to reporting was the military process, which does not always provide adequate confidentiality and requires reporting within a hierarchy which can discourage complaints against more senior ranked personnel. Focus group participants agreed that as soon as a report

¹⁶ Godier, L, Fossey, M, *Addressing the knowledge gap: sexual violence and harassment in the UK Armed Forces*, Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, 164(5) DOI: [10.1136/jramc-2017-000810](https://doi.org/10.1136/jramc-2017-000810) (2017)

¹⁷ MOD, [Sexual Harassment: An investigation into the nature, prevalence, prevention and management of sexual harassment in the British Army](#) Pg 4, (2018)

¹⁸ MOD, [Sexual Harassment: An investigation into the nature, prevalence, prevention and management of sexual harassment in the British Army](#) Pg 4, (2018)

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰ MOD, [Sexual Harassment: An investigation into the nature, prevalence, prevention and management of sexual harassment in the British Army](#) Pg 34, (2018)

was filed, the Commanding Officer would be notified and the majority of senior personnel would likely know about the allegation.

6.5 Protocols with the civilian justice system in England and Wales, allow for cases of sexual offences to remain within the Service Justice system in cases where both the alleged perpetrator and victim are members of the Armed Forces. In those cases with a civilian victim, either civilian police and/or other appropriate agencies typically deal with the allegation.²¹ Current military practice allows a choice between using either military or civilian police to deal with cases of sexual assault and rape; rape is not included in the list of crimes which are automatically referred to civilian authorities for investigation²². One focus group participant recalled a Servicewoman who had reported being raped to her, and as there were no Military Police available (they are not present on all barracks) she opted to drive the woman to the local police station to report the assault and to preserve any physical evidence.

6.6 MOD figures show that in 2019, 178 investigations were conducted into sexual offences (8 were historical offences), an increase of 25 investigations compared to 2018. Of those investigations 188 suspects were involved: 178 male, no female and 10 unidentified suspects and 212 victims (164 female, 29 male and 19 unknown).²³ This data clearly demonstrates the gendered impact of reported sexual offenses; and the need for the Service Justice System to ensure processes meet the needs of women in Service who report being the victim of sexual offence, as well as historic allegations.

6.7 The Legion suggests that qualitative research into the experiences of female personnel and veterans reporting rape would be useful in identifying any areas for improvement in either the reporting process or subsequent support.

7.0 Maternity and Family Life

7.1 There is currently very little research on the impact of having a family during service on female veterans in the UK. However, having (or intending to have) children is the most commonly reported reason for women leaving Service in the UK earlier in their military career than planned.²⁴ One veteran, in our focus group mentioned that she left Service because of pregnancy as there was no provision for childcare or flexible working at that time.

7.2 Research indicates that some women in-Service find it challenging to balance their roles and careers in the military with family life. Additional difficulties with childcare are encountered by single women in the military with children and women in dual-serving partnerships.²⁵ Veterans in our focus group recalled difficulties experienced by Servicewomen when trying to balance family life and Service. This was especially

²¹ MOD, [Sexual Offences in the Service Justice System 2019](#), (2020)

²² Edwards P, Wright T. [No Man's Land: Research study to explore the experience & needs of women veterans in the UK](#), Forward Assist, (2019)

²³ MOD, [Sexual Offences in the Service Justice System 2019](#), (2020)

²⁴ Burdett H, [The mental health and social wellbeing of UK ex-service personnel: The resettlement process](#), King's College London, (2014)

²⁵ ²⁵ Woodhead C. [The mental health and well-being of women in the UK Armed Forces](#), Kings College London, (2013).

compounded in dual-service partnerships; with some personnel having to send young children to boarding school when both parents were deployed. The group discussed the feelings of guilt and anxiety making these kinds of choices can produce, and noted it could have a negative impact on mental health.

- 7.3** One participant in our focus group mentioned that once a Servicewoman has children, it is likely that she will no longer deploy and that men would usually then fill that role.
- 7.4** One participant in the focus group commented that, as a single person she would be expected to cover evening and weekend assignments in place of personnel with families. The participant felt that sometimes military culture prioritised personnel with children over those who were single.
- 7.5** The Legion welcomes recent government initiatives aimed at addressing some of these issues, including changes to flexible working²⁶ and a pilot for ‘wraparound’ childcare, with children of service personnel receiving entitlement to free breakfast and after-school childcare.²⁷²⁸ We look forward to any future data on the efficacy of these initiatives.
- 7.6 The Legion recommends further research is conducted into the specific needs of female veterans during maternity and in balancing Service and family life, including those who are single.**

8.0 Health

- 8.1** An emerging area of literature is the gender data gap.²⁹ For research this means that frequently either data on women is not collected or it is not disaggregated by sex. For service delivery this can result in a one-size-fits-all approach, where programmes designed around male participants are rolled out to women, without assessment of whether this will meet their needs.³⁰ Women have long served in the Armed Forces, but over the last two decades they have begun to serve in more roles and as of 2018, are now able to serve in all roles including infantry, Royal Marines and SAS. This means that they face the same risks as their male counterparts, especially with regards to injury and illness.
- 8.2** In recent years, there has been an emerging focus, primarily in the United States, on how the health of female veterans might be affected by standardised equipment.^{31 32} The essential equipment issued to women such as bergens and webbing are designed to suit the male physique. For example, women are generally shorter than

²⁶ [Armed Forces \(Flexible Working\) Act 2018 — UK Parliament](#)

²⁷ MOD, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-wraparound-childcare-for-the-armed-forces>, (2020)

²⁸ MOD, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/flexible-engagements-system-what-you-need-to-know/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-flexible-engagements-system>, (2020)

²⁹ Criado-Perez, C, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (2020)

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ United States Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, [2018 annual report](#) , Pg 10, (2019)

³² US Congress, [Female Body Armor Modernization Act of 2019](#), (2019)

men and standard bergen is often too long, placing extra pressure on the spine and pelvis and causing musco-skeletal injuries.³³

8.3 The lack of information on female Serving personnel can also impact on the way they are treated medically. Understanding how the female body responds to injury is critical to ensure that women receive the most suitable treatment. Research from the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq has drawn attention to these differences. Mayhew, in an exploration of the treatment of amputees in Afghanistan and Iraq notes that the inflammatory response (by the body) to trauma exhibited by male personnel is different for women; *'It's different for girls. Female sex hormones make the inflammatory mechanisms operate more safely, protecting the female body from its hyperactivity. This may have something to do with the physical ordeal of childbirth...'*³⁴

8.4 In previous conflicts, women were not as present in front line roles as they have been over the last 15 years, so it is understandable that this is an under researched area. However, any future research into the health of the Armed Forces should acknowledge that the physical impact of Service will be influenced by the physiological and biological differences between male and females.

8.5 In recent years there have been concerted efforts to remove the stigma around poor mental health within the Armed Forces. Recent research undertaken by the Legion notes that; *'Many veterans, with common mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, have negative attitudes to treatment or believe they will be treated in a stigmatising way. As a consequence, mental health problems are not always acknowledged.'*³⁵ However, this research was based on majority male veterans. The statistics for females seeking help with mental health paint a different picture. Research carried out by the MoD found that *'Personnel from all age groups accessed military mental healthcare and females sought help more than males, as seen in the UK general population'*.³⁶

8.6 Recent research suggests that deployed female personnel experience PTSD or combat exposure at similar rates and have supports needs similar to their male counterparts.³⁷ However, the same research found that deployed women were less likely to perceive that they were members of a cohesive unit and were more likely than men to report symptoms of common mental disorders. Further findings from this study suggest women are more likely to have a serving military partner.³⁸ Should this prove to be a consistent finding, it is likely that the family and relationship support needs of women in a combat role may be somewhat different from those of men.

More research, however is needed into the mental health conditions

³³ Johnson V, et al, [Load Carriage and the Female Soldier](#) Journal of Military and Veterans' Health Review Article Issue Volume 19 No. 3, (2011)

³⁵ The Royal British Legion, [Making the Benefits System Fit for Service](#) , p.21, (2020)

³⁶ MOD, [UK Armed Forces Mental Health: Annual Summary & Trends Over Time, 2007/08 - 2019/20](#) p.1, (2020)

³⁷ Jones, N et al, [British military women: combat exposure, deployment and mental health](#), *Occupational medicine*, Volume69, Issue number 8-9, (2019)

³⁸ Ibid

experienced by Service personnel and whether they present differently in men and women.

8.7 Compensation either through the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme (AFCS) or War Disablement Pension scheme are essential to the finances of veterans who are too ill to work. As the body of evidence on the role of Service on the female body grows, it is likely that the impact on women will be different to that of men. The Legion is concerned that the criteria used to decide Armed Forces Compensation Scheme Awards is based on the effects of Service on the male physique and may not be suitable for assessing female injury. **Research should be undertaken into the experiences of female veterans who apply for and receive compensation and the upcoming 2021 Armed Forces Compensation Scheme Quinquennial Review terms of reference would benefit from specifically addressing inequalities that may exist between the genders when it comes to the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme.**

8.8 Another significant and more widely explored area of concern regarding female veterans is alcohol use. The difference between civilian and military drinking is stark among female personnel; female Serving personnel drink at more harmful levels than women in the general population, in patterns similar to men in the general population. The Legion's 2014 *Household Survey of the ex-Service Community* found that female Service personnel are around five times more likely than women in the general population to be alcohol dependent (5% vs 1%).³⁹ Fear et al found that 49% of women in the UK Armed Forces had an AUDIT score of 8 or above (defined as hazardous drinking and considered by the World Health Organisation to be harmful to health), higher than both men and women in the UK general population at 38% and 16% respectively. Armed Forces men were at 67%.⁴⁰

8.9 The above information on mental health and alcohol use shows that there are distinct differences between male and female veteran behaviours, that can influence their health outcomes. It also highlights the need for researchers and policymakers to ensure that future research captures the differences between male and female veterans so that there is no inequality in the health outcomes between male and female veterans.

9.0 Conclusion

9.1 The evidence presented above clearly shows that female veterans and Serving personnel have different experiences, behaviours and needs to those of their male counterparts. However, the UK research base is indicative at best on a number of areas worthy of further investigation. Current research is primarily international, and anecdotal evidence strongly suggest that female veterans have specific needs which differ to their male counterparts.

³⁹ The Royal British Legion, [Household Survey of the ex-Service Community](#), Pg 58, (2014)

⁴⁰ Fear Nicola T et al, [Patterns of drinking in the UK Armed Forces](#), Society for the Study of Addiction, Pg.1751 (2007)

9.2 Whilst they currently only make up 10% of the Armed Forces, female personnel and veterans are still a significant minority with idiosyncratic needs in a unique environment. In some areas, such as health and sexual offences and resettlement, more research is needed to better understand female Service and ex-Service personnel; without a robust evidence base to adequately assess the needs of Servicewomen and female veterans underpinning them, policies risk continuing to exacerbate inequalities rather than reduce them.

10.0 Summary of Recommendations

- **More work needs to be done to understand the needs of Commonwealth Veterans, but for the female veterans who make up this cohort in this group, special attention should be paid to their experiences as both women in the Armed Forces and how this is compounded by their status as Commonwealth recruits.**
- **The Legion would recommend that the Defence Transition Service further explore intervention strategies to ensure that female veterans approaching transition are provided with tailored and gender specific points of access.**
- **The Legion believes that an analysis of the international research on female veterans housing needs should be undertaken to find out if any recommendations can be applied and adapted to female veterans in the UK Armed Forces. This should also sit alongside new commissioned research into how female veterans are able to access and sustain housing.**
- **Advice and signposting on where to find support with finances should form part of the transition package. For older female veterans, tailored advice and support should be provided to ensure they are able to maintain a decent standard of living in retirement.**
- **The Legion recommends further research is conducted into the specific needs of female veterans during resettlement and that female personnel have the option of tailored support during this period to enhance employment outcomes post Service.**
- **UK Service personnel could benefit from an educational package around general and targeted sexual behaviours, including strengthening reporting channels and signposting to them.**
- **The Legion suggests that qualitative research into the experiences of female personnel and veterans reporting sexual offences would be useful in identifying any areas for improvement in either the reporting process or subsequent support.**

- The Legion recommends further research is conducted into the specific needs of female veterans during maternity and in balancing Service and family life.
- More research is needed into the mental health conditions experienced by Service personnel and whether they present differently in men and women.
- Research should be undertaken into the experiences of female veterans who apply for and receive compensation. The Legion believes that the 2021 Armed Forces Compensation Scheme Quinquennial Review terms of reference would benefit from specifically addressing any inequalities that may exist between the genders under the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme.

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- ⁱⁱ MOD, [Annual population survey: UK armed forces veterans residing in Great Britain](#), (2019)
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- ^{iv} The Royal British Legion, [Household Survey of the ex-Service Community](#), Pg 81 (2014)
- ^v MOD, [Sexual Harassment: An investigation into the nature, prevalence, prevention and management of sexual harassment in the British Army](#) Pg 4, (2018)
- ^{vi} MOD, [Sexual Harassment: An investigation into the nature, prevalence, prevention and management of sexual harassment in the British Army](#) Pg 4, (2018)
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- ^{xiii} Jones, N et al, [British military women: combat exposure, deployment and mental health](#), *Occupational medicine*, Volume69, Issue number 8-9, (2019)
- ^{xiv} MOD, [UK Armed Forces Mental Health: Annual Summary & Trends Over Time, 2007/08 - 2019/20](#) p.1, (2020)
- ^{xv} The Royal British Legion, [Household Survey of the ex-Service Community](#), Pg 58, (2014)
- ^{xvi} Fear Nicola T et al, [Patterns of drinking in the UK Armed Forces](#), Society for the Study of Addiction, Pg.1751 (2007)