

Written evidence submitted by Christina Dodds and Dr Matthew Kiernan,
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1. Introduction

1.1 Christina Dodds and Dr Matthew Kiernan are both veterans, with a combined military service of over 41 years', including over 3 years on multiple operational tours.

1.2 Christina served in the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Service (QARANC) as a non-commissioned officer. Towards the end of her career, she served as the Corp Regimental Sergeant Major (CRSM) for the QARANC, becoming a member to the senior RSMs of the British Army group. As the only female member during her tenure, she was regularly called upon to advocate and make comment on female service personnel with the senior command team of the British Army.

1.3 Christina is currently teaching social work at Northumbria University, where she trained as a social worker immediately after retirement from the Army. Christina is also a PhD candidate in the Northern Hub for Veteran and Military Families Research, at Northumbria University. Dr Kiernan is her PhD supervisor. Her current study is investigating women veterans' experiences of life before, during and after military service. Participants served in the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force, with service in World War II, Northern Ireland, Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan.

1.4 While in service Dr Kiernan served as Royal Navy single service head of mental health nursing as well as the MODs Defense Specialist Nurse Advisor in Mental Health.

1.5 Dr Kiernan is an Associate Professor of Mental Health and Veteran Studies, Director of the Northern Hub for Veterans and Military families Research and currently the Chair for Independent Advisory Panel of the British Army Infantry Training Centre (ITC) Catterick where he was involved in the preparation for training women in ground close combat.

2. Call for Evidence Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life

2.1 The call for evidence hopes to establish the evidence and research needs of both women servicing and those in our veteran community. We will collectively refer to these women as 'military women' in this document. The committee have set the focus for evidence, towards the challenges faced, and we appreciate this is not an exhaustive list, one challenge not listed is the systemic failure to recognise the worth of military women in our Armed Forces, which contributes to the challenges listed in the review.

2.2 As a woman veteran and researcher, the early findings of my current study, suggest that, despite widespread change in society, and the military, there are themes that impact military women in each generation, as pertinent today, as they were in the past. Many of the challenges that exist, have existed wherever women work alongside the military (Rappaport, 2007).

2.3 The PhD study, referred to in this report, aims to contribute to the overall knowledge of military women, by exploring the impact of service on their lives. In the absence of significant research into the lives of the women who have served in the British military, this PhD study aims to contribute significantly to the developing knowledge in this area. Despite this the study can only capture a small section of the experiences and challenges of the women interviewed. Every era of women believes their generation is unique in the context of military service, however, my research enabled me to evidence that, while there is difference, there are significant similarities. Many of the women's stories, felt like my story and the stories other women shared.

2.4 A limitation of this study is that it does not capture the experience of women currently serving. A future need is to develop research that collaborates with both serving and veterans women groups. Such research can help target limited resources towards the most significant challenges. No one group has all the answers or owns all the challenges. Ignore the past risk repeating mistakes, ignore current cohort then you are at risk of directing valuable resources towards past challenges.

2.5 Some of the challenges outlined in the call for evidence, will be explored in the following section. Evidence will include academic literature, popular literature, and the early findings from the primary author's PhD study. Also, as a woman who served 24yrs in the Army and has been a member of the veteran community for over 10 years, the evidence will include their perspectives. As an insider researcher, I ultimately influenced the stories the women shared, interviews appeared to be casual conversation, exploring their experiences, rather than formal interviews.

3. Challenges remaining for female serving personnel and veterans

3.1 The call for evidence includes several themes suggested in the challenges listed and the terms of reference for the review. The review has asked that evidence is concise and while not limited to 3000 words, it can be assumed that evidence should not be significantly over the guidance provided. For this reason, the evidence submitted in this report, focuses on the key challenge of recruitment and retention, which by their nature contribute towards other themes in the list.

3.2. The authors feel able to contribute to the themes in the review, based on personal experience, knowledge of current literature and research in this area. If future opportunities are available, we would wish to contribute further.

4. Recruitment

4.1 An increase in the percentage of women serving, is influenced by the overall reduction in the number of people in the British military. As such the increase hides the real time reduction in numbers of women serving over the last decade (MOD, 2012, 2020c). Despite this the downward trend is less sharp than that of men who serve.

4.2 NATO (2015) suggests that increased opportunities for women is fuelling the increase, and while this may be true across NATO countries, this cannot be easily evidenced within the British military. With all roles in the British military now open to women, the challenge remains to understand the impact on recruitment and the changes this may have on those that serve. As change is not yet established enough to evidence recruitment patterns for women, there is worth in exploring why women join the military, predating the current recruitment trends.

4.3 Part of my research explored why women join, and although this is not yet published, early findings suggest that over 90% had friends or family connections to the military before joining. Of these, only one had a female influence. Such connections acted as role models, who share their experiences and guide women towards service life. Just one interviewee had no direct connections to the military, despite this, she was dogged in her determination to join, approaching recruitment offices regularly from the age of 15. By the time she joined, she had applied to the RN (by post), no response, accepted into the RAF, but a two-year waiting list led her to join the Army. Perhaps with no personal connections or role models supporting her journey into the military, her priority was getting through the door. What that meant developed later.

4.4 Role models were also not a strong predictor of many of the women in my research, when predicting their Career Employment Groups (CEG) aspirations. With male role models, there may have been little opportunity to explore what being a woman in the military meant. Little research exists exploring how role models influence and impact on the career choices of military women, however, a recent US study explored gendered role models and how they shape early career aspirations for military women (Smith & Rosenstein, 2017). Women role models can impact the career aspirations of women (Cheryan, Siy, Vichayapai, Drury, & Kim, 2011), with Smith and Rosenstein (2017) suggesting women role models improve visibility and increase career aspirations. As such, for many of the women

interviewed, a contributing factor to a general lack of focus on CEG when joining, may well have resulted from a lack of women role models.

4.5 How the military harnesses role models on recruitment should be explored further. If role models are known to increase recruitment, career satisfaction and retention, (Cheryan et al., 2011; Smith & Rosenstein, 2017), rethinking how these connections are made is needed. Can the military learn from STEM projects to help inform women of their opportunities in the military and adapt current models to reflect the needs of women?

4.6 Using serving personnel as role models has always been one of the main recruitment tools for the military. When reflecting on the current model of recruitment, the long-term success needs further consideration, to ensure it is both targeted and cost effective. It is imperative that any recruitment strategy includes female role models who can inspire the next generation of recruits, providing prospective recruits with an honest and realistic source of information so that informed choices can be made. New generations of recruits are inspired through modern exciting TV and internet adverts 'I was born in ..., but I was made in the Royal Navy'. These offer a glimpse into the lifestyle of someone in the military, but not necessarily the reality of serving in the Armed Forces. If this is the only barometer on military life, the reality can be a shock, false expectation possible contributing to early service leavers.

4.7 The early findings of my research suggest that women join the military for many reasons, including, serving in times of need, family pride or tradition, on impulse or after years of planning. Apart from the women who joined during WWII, all participants left service before they had planned. All had stories of why they left early, and many continue to wonder what if...

4.8 Research suggests that early service leavers are at increased risk of experiencing difficulties after leaving the Armed Forces and a very poor return on investment for the UK taxpayer (Buckman et al., 2013; Godier, Caddick, Kiernan, & Fossey, 2018). Research focus on retaining women essential to understand their needs.

5. Retention

5.1 The cost of training an individual soldier on the shortest recruit training course in the British army, 11 weeks, is estimated at £38,000 (UK Parliament, 2020). It is therefore important that the military focuses as much on retention as they do recruitment. The MOD commits a significant part of their annual budget to personnel costs, almost a quarter of the overall budget is dedicated to service personnel (MOD, 2020a). Retaining people in the

military is challenging, but vitally important as the personnel are one of the most expensive components of the Armed Forces.

5.2 When exploring retention, you need to first explore why women leave, and determine whether their reasons are preventable, the same or different to men who serve.

5.3 Of the women interviewed for my study, the Flexible Working Act (2018), may have enabled some to continue serving when service life simply became incompatible with rigid military working conditions. One participant stated that she had to make a choice between her child or the military, she chose her child, citing unreasonable work patterns and unsupportive chain of command. Struggling to bond with her young child, who spent 12 hours a day with a child minder, and already asleep when collected, she chose the only option available, to be a mother to her daughter.

5.4 It is no surprise that both men and women cite family as a main reason for leaving the military. A balance between military and family life is difficult to achieve. A recent review commissioned by the MOD looked at the impact of military life on service personnel and their families (Selous, Walker, & Misca, 2020) confirming military life significantly impacted on personal relationships. Add a gendered lens and the additional pressure placed on women to nurture and prioritise the family impacts military women disproportionately. Whilst over 90% of women taking maternity leave return to serve, outflow continues after initial return, with 12% leaving up to one year after returning (MOD, 2020b). Since 2014, over 40% women who took maternity leave have since left service (MOD, 2020b).

5.5 Flexible working may support women, offering up to 3 years break in service (MOD, 2021), however, there is only a right to request flexible working, no right to have a request authorised. As such this may not support the needs of new mothers. The needs of the service rightly take priority, but with increasing number of women officers and women in key roles, flexible work options may be difficult for mothers to navigate (MOD, 2020b). Further consideration on flexible working may be required, explicitly supporting the needs of mothers, and create a clear and consistent route back into service. A consistent approach across all services, may offer more options for military women including for new mothers.

5.6 Outside of the general terms and conditions of the Armed Forces, it is often individuals or groups that cause the most distress for military women, leading to premature discharge. Despite zero tolerance, on bullying and discrimination, attitudes and behaviours of individuals and groups cause significant concern. I once recall a senior female officer shouting at the top of their voice at a SNCO, unhappy with their medical certificate. Reason for absence, post-natal depression. It sent a message across the unit on the attitude of the command staff, she did not complain, neither did anyone else.

5.7 Whilst I considered myself progressive, championing women's rights in the military, my own military indoctrination left me conflicted and sometimes part of the problem. It is only after leaving, I can reflect on the impact this had on myself and others. In service I seldom challenged the systemic injustice that impacted women more than men. I sat at the top of my tree, thinking 'look, you can get here', if you want to be successful, put career first, family second, push for excellence and never give excuses because you are a woman. I ignored my sexuality, my right for a family and health needs, to enable me to have the military career I wanted. These choices impact on our lives during service and into retirement.

5.8 There is a generation of military women who struggle with the choices made to have that career, childlessness is one key issue. We have previously discussed that many women leave due to their wish to have a family, however, linked to this are the choices other women faced to maintain a career. This mix in service can be toxic, both men and women suggesting mothers are burdens impacting on others, while childlessness shows a commitment to service. Many military women are likely to experience this dilemma, a balance between 'I am good enough or not'. No matter your service background, women strive to be recognised, sadly a top accolade is when the men you serve with, start seeing you as one of the lads. One woman's story consistently links her achievements compared to the men she served with and their acceptance of her as one of the lads.

5.9 My research has many accounts from the women being accepted or not by the men they served with. While disbandment of the women's services may have led to an increase in these accounts, my research shows that all eras had difficulties with being accepted. A participant of the research who served during WWII, recalls how she had to train large groups of men on the communication equipment. Each time the men would either ignore her, make fun of her or at worst resort to sexualised taunts and behaviour. Eventually, they realised she knew what she was talking about and listened, but she had to prove herself with every new group.

5.10 Many of the women interviewed talk about having to prove themselves to men time and time again, they had to be better, work harder and accept being a woman was different in the military. One woman spoke of constantly covering for her male colleague, who struggled with the new systems. Their Sergeant coming to her to deal with the work, working extra hours before and after her working day. When promotions came, he was promoted. Angry and frustrated she was told "he has a young family and needs the money".

5.11 It is seldom one incident that leads to women leaving the military, it is often an accumulation of treatment and behaviour. Lack of promotion opportunities is a key indicator

for premature discharge. Unless the promotion system has changed since my own discharge, it is a system that is manipulated by report writers. Sitting on a significant number of promotional boards at manning and record in Glasgow, I have witnessed reports that barely reflect the soldier I know. As a report writer, I learnt the language of promotion, and while some report writers gave exceptional grades, they ignored the importance of the narrative. The grade gets people to the table, the narrative gets them promoted. It is therefore understandable people get frustrated when they fail to get promoted time and time again.

5.12 Military personnel talk about the process of promotion a lot. Most people on the shop floor know the truth of someone's abilities and worth, which is why when promotion seems unfair, people consider their future elsewhere. In my experience, at promotion times, you see an increase in people seeking guidance on leaving or requesting discharge.

6. Summary

6.1 Knowledge in understanding the experiences of military women in the British military, must be addressed. This call for evidence will hopefully start to establish a baseline in which future research and support can focus over the next ten years. Currently the experiences of British military women is critically under researched, and while international literature fares better, women are barely considered in the global literature (C Dodds & Kiernan, 2019). The UK Government, Health and Social Care, military and civilian charities supporting military women, need to focus limited resources towards those most at need. Increasing the knowledge of military women will enable support to target needs and enable women to feel included. Never again should military women feel ignored or invisible (Christina Dodds, 2016; C Dodds & Kiernan, 2019).

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