

Written evidence submitted by Amy Victoria Denton

Interrupting the Band of Brothers: An Exploration of Attitudes Towards Women Serving in Ground Close Combat

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This evidence addresses the following terms of reference:

- Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges in the armed forces?
 - Are the Government and MoD doing enough to address these challenges? What more could be done? How effective are their strategies/initiatives?
1. **About the author:** Denton has a BSc in International Politics (Surrey) and an MSc in Security Studies (UCL), with both degrees focusing on the issue of women in the military, particularly in the Ground Close Combat (GCC) environment. She is currently employed by defence consultancy TP Group as an Analytical Consultant.
 2. **Summary:** This is an executive summary of the study entitled '*Interrupting the Band of Brothers: An Exploration of Attitudes Towards Women Serving in Ground Close Combat*', completed in April 2019 (unpublished). It aimed to understand the current attitudes held by serving Army personnel on the subject of women in combat. The purpose was to capture any key concerns or trends in these attitudes in order to inform gender integration processes and improve the experiences of women and men serving together in combat. The study included interviews with British male and female GCC Officers and Combat Support Officers. The key findings and recommendations were:
 - a. Most critically, there is no longer a strong prevalence of the perception of women as non-combatants in the British Army.
 - b. There is some confusion among male officers around shared and separate ablution facilities in GCC bases. Clarity on this would help ease such concerns.
 - c. Men showed some concern regarding female personal hygiene and menstruation, whereas serving female personnel did not see an issue given their own experiences on operations. Education on this topic could help close gaps in understanding.
 - d. Army training should include clear restrictions on sexual relationships within military units. Professionalism should be instilled in all recruits and responsibility should be apportioned equally across both parties.

- e. Differences between female and male PE sessions in state schools could be influencing the propensity to engage in a military career.
3. **Introduction:** Following the 2016 announcement for all combat roles to be open to women, the researcher recognised that a change in legislation would not necessarily equate to a change in attitudes. Therefore, a timely study investigating attitudes towards women serving in combat could help shed light on the type of environment women will be entering into.
4. **Literature Review:** The literature review comprised of 4 sections: women as non-combatants in theories of IR, portrayal of women involved in war and violence, female combatants and unit cohesion, and female British soldiers' experiences. The literature review supported the researcher's concern that whilst a change in legislation is a step forward, women who join the military could still face resistance from those within the organisation. Reasons for this range from women being seen as 'naturally peaceful' to concerns around disruption to unit cohesion.
5. **Methodology:** The study used semi-structured private interviews with a sample of 14 male and female participants. This consisted of 12 officers, 1 First-Class Warrant Officer (WO1) and 1 Sergeant. The study focused on officers rather than soldiers because in their leadership role they have a bigger influence on shaping culture. The interviews were audio recorded. Critical Frame Analysis (CFA) was the method applied to the transcripts to extract key themes, patterns and silences.

The study proposal and the interview questions were edited and approved by the Army Scientific Assessment Committee at the British Army Headquarters.

6. Findings:

- a. **Emotional Resilience:** Overall, women were not viewed as less emotionally resilient than men. Some suggested women maybe *more* emotionally resilient than men due to having to face resistance in their military careers or having to 'prove themselves'. Even those who were less in favour of women in GCC said they viewed women as equally emotionally resilient. Evidence for this view referred to female medics, who were argued to have seen 'the worst' in battle.
- b. **Aggression:** Women were not viewed as less capable of aggression than men. In fact, many shared the view that aggression is no longer a desirable trait for military operations. Instead, 'controlled aggression' was the preferred term.
- c. **Interest in Infantry:** There was some concern around women's interest in joining infantry in particular. Reasons for this included: physicality, unpleasantness of the role and the unlikelihood of women achieving a 'critical

mass'. It was also mentioned that the socio-economic background of male infantry soldiers could be more hostile to gender integration.

In terms of predisposition, it was argued that boys are likely to be exposed to sports which foster strength, endurance and camaraderie than girls, making them more likely to opt for the infantry. This led to a discussion about differences in girls' and boys' PE lessons.

- d. **Critical Mass:** Female officers dispelled the idea that women need a critical mass in order to integrate successfully. This indicates that the male perception of the issue might be greater than its reality. Instead, drawing on their own experiences, female officers reported that they bonded with comrades 'regardless of gender'.
 - e. **Physical Standards:** The theme of physical standards dominated many of the interviews, despite it not featuring in the question set. This indicates that there is still a strong emphasis on physical standards above other, equally important, entry standards. A more progressive view was expressed by some officers who focused on overall ability (mental competence, leadership, emotional maturity, ability to perform role) rather than privileging physical standards alone.
 - f. **Leadership:** A majority of participants felt women brought useful attributes to leadership roles, such as analytical ability.
 - g. **Medics:** Women's contribution to the Army Medical Services was referenced by some as a reason to include women in all combat arms, due to their ability to cope with mentally demanding situations and carry heavy medical equipment for long periods of time.
 - h. **Sex:** Sexual distraction was a prominent theme in interviews. It seemed that the presence of women was blamed for sexual misconduct, rather than an equal distribution of responsibility and professionalism in both parties.
 - i. **Female hygiene:** Whilst men seemed confused and concerned about how female hygiene and menstruation would affect operations, female interviewees asserted that there are straightforward ways of mitigating problems.
 - j. **Civilian perceptions:** Most interviewees expressed that civilians have a very inaccurate view of what it takes to be a soldier/officer, due to misrepresentation in films and videogames. This misrepresentation has over-masculinised the Army and focused too much on infantry roles.
7. **Further research:** Since this project, the researcher has undertaken a second study looking at experiences of women in close combat in other nations. Several useful findings and recommendations were made. This paper is currently being prepared for

submission to a Defence journal, however if the committee wish to view this paper please contact the researcher for more information.

Please contact the researcher for further information on her work, or the full text of this project.

Annex A: Interview Questions

Primary Questions

1. How do you feel about the decision to allow women to serve in GCC roles?
2. Why do you feel this way?
3. What attributes do you think a frontline or GCC serving soldier should possess?
4. Why are these attributes important?
5. To what extent do you think women possess those attributes?
6. Are there parts of the role do you think women will find more difficult?
7. Are there parts of the role that you think women will cope well with?
8. What have you heard your colleagues saying about this matter?
9. What have you heard soldiers in your unit saying about this matter?
10. At the time you first joined the Army, what was the opinion of women in GCC roles?
11. How have opinions in this regard changed over the years you have served?

Subsidiary Questions – *To be asked if the answers to the primary questions do not fill the allotted time.*

1. What motivated you to join the Army?
2. What is the most important skill that soldiers need to have when working as a unit?
3. What sort of things can impair team cohesion?
4. What makes an ideal soldier?
5. Do you think that civilians have an accurate perception of what makes an ideal soldier?
6. Is there anything fundamentally different about soldiers who work in GCC units and soldiers in other parts of the Army?

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