

Executive Summary

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NO MAN'S LAND



RESEARCH STUDY TO EXPLORE THE
EXPERIENCE & NEEDS OF WOMEN VETERANS
IN THE UK

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Executive Summary

The first of its kind in the UK, this report presents the findings from a research study exploring the needs and experiences of Women veterans carried out across 2018-2019. The study has been completed by Forward Assist., a North East charity that offer practical support and guidance to former service personnel of all ages as they physically & psychologically adapt to life as a civilian. Forward Assist has for some time recognised that women veterans are very much a 'hidden population' and has campaigned for 'Gender Specific' mental health services to address this unmet need.

There is undoubtedly a paucity of research in the UK on the experiences of women in the military and though it is known anecdotally that women veterans have additional and different needs to males, there is no evidence-base to prove this.

Using Women Veterans as privileged access interviewers the study aimed to give women veterans a clear voice to state their needs pre and post military and to help generate a discussion about the service improvements required to meet these needs.

In total we spoke to 100 Women veterans in order to explore their military journey to provide an evidence base for adjusting current military practice.

The results of this consultation presents an interesting challenge for future policy directives in the support of Women Veterans. Given the risk factors that were identified prior to joining the military (many respondents reported being in the care system and joining the military to escape an abusive home environment), the fact that the veterans interviewed received no psychological assessment prior to joining the armed forces or when leaving was surprising.

The discrimination faced by Women Veterans whilst serving their country and the rates of trauma exposure faced by women serving in the UK gives real cause for concern. Military sexual trauma (MST) has been defined as "sexual harassment that is threatening in character or physical assault of a sexual nature that occurred while the victim was in the military". In their time serving, over three quarters of the sample either sustained or witnessed physical or sexual assault on a female counterpart. In total 52% had been sexually assaulted whilst serving with 26% reporting that they were physically assaulted. Not surprisingly 58% of the sample reported having mental health issues with little support provided once the women had left the forces to help prepare them with their transition back to civilian life.

We offer the following 5 observations and 17 recommendations for service providers and commissioners of Military Service charities:

1. Although women veterans dislike the term veteran, we use it here for the sake of convenience. However, a new, more acceptable expression should be sought.
2. Create a Women Veterans' Department in the newly established Office for Veterans' Affairs (OFV).
3. Women veterans need a single point of contact in the OFV to champion and promote their needs and provide them with cross-party political support so that their service and contribution can be both recognised and celebrated.
4. The development of a national tri-service peer-support network for women veterans could help reduce social isolation and address the hidden population phenomenon.
5. OFV should assist in the design of gender specific services for women veterans and help identify women veterans living in the community, whilst proactively targeting them with information on specialist support services, entitlements, employment opportunities, health information and benefits.
6. Women veterans report that they do not seek services as soon as they are needed. Conversely when they do need support, they need to access services immediately.
7. Women's unique experiences transitioning from the military to civilian life are different to those of men. This fact must be recognised in order to design services that are fit for purpose.
8. The civilian community has difficulty recognising women as veterans. This often leads to women veterans becoming depressed, isolated, disconnected from services and angry that their personal service goes unrecognised.
9. Few services, if any, are available specifically for women veterans; especially those with children.
10. Military Sexual Trauma (MST) should be acknowledged and screened for and specialist services and guidelines designed and made available to those in need of support.
11. Adopt and roll out a version of the US Army's Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention programme (SHARP) which was designed to prevent sexual harassment and sexual assaults before they occur; by changing the culture and offering thorough investigation, prosecution, protection for the victim and victim care support.
12. The military has a legal and moral responsibility to create a culture in which women are treated as equals and service personnel treat one another with respect. Regular training programmes that endeavour to empower the bystander

to intervene and encourage reporting, would work well if delivered at the same time as training designed to address sexual harassment both on and off-duty.

- 13.** Greater understanding and awareness of the impact MST can have on the mental health and wellbeing of both male and female veterans during and after service.
- 14.** The military can currently decide whether to have military or civilian police deal with cases of sexual assault, exposure or voyeurism; rape is not included in the definition of 'very serious crime' which must be automatically referred to civilian authorities for investigation. (Bolt, Burdon and Kemp 2019) This needs to change.
- 15.** The introduction of an independent and robust reporting system for women veterans who wish to report historical abuse.
- 16.** Collaborative investigations between civilian and military police forces should be actively encouraged.
- 17.** Create a single point of contact within the Criminal Justice System to identify women veterans subject to community-based Court Orders and those in custody.
- 18.** Action all the 36 recommendations in 2019 MOD 'Inappropriate Behaviour Report' with immediate effect.
- 19.** The introduction of an individualised needs assessment at point of transition for women leaving the military, including how and where to access confidential person-centred support and trauma-informed therapy in the civilian community.
- 20.** Design and deliver specialist 'appropriate behaviour' training for military charities, veterans and serving service personnel on the specific issues affecting women veterans.
- 21.** The development of a gender-specific Healthcare and Wellbeing Centre of Excellence.
- 22.** The MOD should offer in-depth psychological screening for individuals prior to joining and when leaving the Armed Forces, especially those that may have Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE).

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