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Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life – Submission of Evidence from Forces in Mind Trust to Defence Committee Inquiry, January 2021

About Forces in Mind Trust

Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) was established in 2011 by a £35 million endowment from the Big Lottery Fund (now The National Lottery Community Fund). Our vision is for all ex-Service personnel and their families to lead fulfilled civilian lives, and our mission is to enable successful sustainable transition by funding evidence generation and influence activities that help to further our mission, and by strengthening the capability of the Armed Forces charities sector.

FiMT's goal is one of successful transition and the research we fund is UK-wide. FiMT funds research in seven areas: Housing, Employment, Health, Finance, Criminal Justice System, Relationships, and our new Enabler Programme.

Overview

We welcome the Committee's Inquiry and are responding to it because we know there is evidence to show that there are areas where female Service leavers face greater challenges in comparison both to their male counterparts and to civilians. This effectively presents a 'double whammy' when it comes to transitioning to civilian life.

We have selected those questions posed by the Inquiry that relate most closely to the issues impacting on women's experience of transition from military service. Our responses are supported by the evidence base that we have been developing since we were first established almost ten years ago. We would be very happy to answer any further questions that the Committee may have as the Inquiry progresses.

Why do female Service personnel choose to leave the armed forces? Are the reasons different to why men leave the armed forces?

Recent research on Female Service Leavers and Employment¹ shows that most female Service leavers leave the Armed Forces voluntarily, with the most common reasons including: work-life balance; job satisfaction; perceived quality of management; perceived lack of future opportunities; and family responsibilities. This research highlighted several differences between female cohorts. Royal Navy personnel were more likely to report work-life balance and deployments as influential in their decision to leave and RAF personnel were more likely to report management issues. Other Ranks were more likely than Officers to mention bullying and harassment, and single respondents were more likely to say that accommodation was an influence. Differences in age can also be seen with those in their 20s being influenced by job satisfaction, and young leavers being more likely to

¹ Female Service Leavers and Employment, FiMT, Cranfield School of Management, Institute of Employment Studies, 2019

mention pay and reward, and relationships with colleagues, as reasons for leaving. Women in their late 30s and 40s were more likely to mention the impact on their spouses.

Having a spouse who is also in the Armed Forces can place additional stress on a family. Female leavers whose spouse also served mentioned specific challenges which included: no option of co-location; shift work; deployments; and difficulties in moving children and finding school places. These challenges often resulted in one partner having to make the decision to leave their career in the Armed Forces to provide stability for their family. In most cases, it was the female spouse who decided to leave.

The perceived lack of good management was another reason for leaving that was mentioned, with some female leavers having felt unappreciated and unsupported in their role by their direct Chain of Command. Others spoke of receiving a poor level of support when dealing with challenging circumstances such as the death of a colleague. A minority of respondents also reported a culture of sexism and sexual harassment in the Armed Forces, and stated that the subsequent poor handling of such cases by their superiors had led them to make the decision to leave. The perceived lack of control over their career was an influence in the decision to leave for female Service leavers. Some felt that they did not have full control over their future career in the Armed Forces, including where they were going to live. The pull to civilian employment was seen here with similar roles being available in national security and defence outside of the Armed Forces, where they would have more control.

Do female service personnel face unique and/or additional challenges in transition to civilian life?

Anecdotally, female leavers are less likely than male leavers to register with the Career Transition Partnership (CTP)², the organization established by the MOD to prepare Service leavers for civilian life. The reasons for this are not known, precisely because non-registrants are 'invisible' to CTP. It would be useful to better understand the reasons behind women's non-registration in order for them to avoid missing out on the opportunities and support that are available through engagement with CTP.

Female veterans have been found to be almost twice as likely as male veterans to describe finding the right job role after leaving the military as 'very hard'³.

Research findings consistently show that certain demographic factors can predict poorer transition outcomes, for example, "being black, or in an ethnic minority or being female"⁴. This reflects labour market outcomes as a whole.

There is also research showing that the prevalence of mental health problems among women is very similar for veterans and non-veterans, but female veterans who served in military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have been found to be more likely to report hazardous alcohol misuse than non-veterans⁵

Further, there is evidence of additional challenges specific to Scotland, where it has been identified that there is a higher than average incidence of suicide among older ex-Service personnel, female ex-Service personnel, and early Service leavers⁶.

² Continue to work. The Transition Mapping Study 2017, Kantar Futures, 2017

³ Veterans work: moving on, Deloitte, the Officers' Association and Forces in Mind Trust, 2018

⁴ The Transition Mapping Studies 2013 and 2017, and Veterans work, moving on, 2018 (refs. 2 and 3 above)

⁵ The mental health and treatment needs of UK ex-military personnel, KCL and University of Liverpool, 2020

⁶ Suicide in Scottish military veterans: a 30-year retrospective cohort study. Occupational Medicine, 67(5), 2017

What should Government, the MoD and industry do to address these?

Our research report on Female Service leavers and Employment⁷ sets out clear recommendations for MOD and for employers to help address the issues faced. These include: better support for women with caring responsibilities while serving; the availability of advice and support from MOD that is female specific, with a focus on ensuring that female Service leavers better understand their skills and experience and how to translate these into those required by civilian employers; and better understanding amongst employers of the skills and experience that female Service leavers bring.

Our FiMT Policy Statement on Health⁸ sets out the changes that are needed to ensure that all ex-Service personnel and their families have access to good quality health services when and where they need them, such as: increased awareness and understanding of veterans' specific health and treatment needs; better and earlier identification of individuals at risk of health problems; and better data recording linkage and sharing. We believe that if the factors affecting access to health services and the issues requiring change are addressed, it will help to resolve some of the issues that are unique to female Service leavers.

What are the issues faced by women veterans once they have left the services?

Some of the issues faced by women once they have left the Services are common to all Service leavers. However, when it comes to employment and health, we know that women who have served in the Armed Forces are less likely to be in work than men after they leave (69% compared with 81%)⁹. Unemployment among female veterans is higher at 13% compared to 9% of male veterans, yet women are less likely than men to claim unemployment benefits¹⁰.

In terms of any differential effects of training and military service on physical health, analysis of medical discharge data indicates that female personnel in the UK armed forces are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to be medically discharged due to physical injuries and musculoskeletal problems¹¹. However, when it comes to combat-related issues post service, there is limited research on the differential effects on mental health of combat exposure during and after deployment. This is likely to be either because research has focused only on men, or because the sample size has contained only a small subset of women¹².

Are the needs of female veterans currently met by the available veterans' services?

While the number of Service women has gradually increased in line with the implementation of equal opportunities policies by the MOD, there is a lack of data and research about their specific health and wellbeing needs, particularly post service¹³. This makes it difficult to assess the extent of unmet need among female Service leavers. At present it is difficult to know how many female veterans are accessing statutory or voluntary health or mental health provision. It could make a real difference if statutory and voluntary mental and related health providers were to consider how their current service provision might be made more user-friendly for women, and what types of service provision would be the most appropriate to meet their needs. For any national or local needs assessment, the female veterans should be considered as an under-represented group.

⁷ Female Services Leavers and Employment, Cranfield School of Management, FiMT, Institute of Employment Studies,

⁸ Policy Statement on Health, FiMT, 2020

⁹ Continue to work. The Transition Mapping Study 2017, Kantar Futures, 2017

¹⁰ Veterans work: moving on, Deloitte, the Officers' Association and Forces in Mind Trust, 2018

¹¹ Call to Mind: United Kingdom, Community Innovations Enterprise on behalf of Forces in Mind Trust, 2017

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

Notwithstanding a shortage of data, there are strong indications that the needs of female veterans are not being met by the available veterans' services. *Call to Mind UK* draws together the key issues and findings from a series of four *Call to Mind* reports for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The research for each of these reports found that few female veterans appeared to be accessing veterans' services. It was stated by respondents that the numbers of female veterans seeking help from statutory health and mental health services was small, and some respondents stated that they had never seen a female veteran in their service.

Recommended Reading

We recommend for further review:

- [Female Service Leavers and Employment](#), Cranfield University, 2019

We work closely with and support the Cobseo Female Veteran Cluster who have commissioned research from Anglia Ruskin University which is due to be published shortly. We know that they have also submitted a response to the Inquiry and recommend their research report, when available, for a comprehensive overview of existing research evidence on the needs of female Service leavers.