

Emotional bullying, and sexual harassment and physical assault of women is widespread in the military

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Women serving in the UK military face a considerable risk of emotional bullying, sexual harassment and physical assault, which can have a serious and long-lasting impact on their mental health and wellbeing, finds research published online in the journal *BMJ Military Health*.

There are currently around 16,500 women serving in the UK military and they make up approximately 11% of personnel. Although women have been able to serve in the UK military for many years, it was not until 2018 that all roles were opened up to them, including deployment to front-line combat.

It is recognised that military women may face additional adversities during deployment on top of the risk of exposure to combat-related trauma, which may impact on their well-being, so the authors set out to investigate the prevalence of military adversity in terms of [sexual harassment](#), sexual assault, emotional bullying and physical assault within a sample of UK women veterans.

They surveyed 750 women veterans who had been in touch with a UK charity which supports women veterans, and the responses showed that a high proportion of these women had experienced military adversity: 22.5% said they had experienced sexual harassment, 5.1% sexual assault, 22.7% emotional bullying and 3.3% [physical assault](#).

These experiences were more likely to be reported by women who were younger, had held the rank of officer, or reported having had a combat or combat support role during their [military service](#).

All types of adversity were significantly associated with probable post-traumatic stress disorder, and different types of adversity had specific impacts on women's mental health and wellbeing.

Sexual harassment was significantly associated with physical somatisation (where the mental distress causes physical symptoms such as pain or fatigue), [sexual assault](#) was significantly associated with alcohol difficulties, and emotional bullying was significantly associated with common mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression, low social support and loneliness.

This was an observational study, so no firm conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect, and the researchers also highlight several limitations.

The study was based around self-reported events so could underestimate or overestimate the real prevalence of what was experienced, and it was not able to assess the impact of cumulative episodes or continuous military adversity on mental health and well-being. The survey had a response rate of 44.6%, meaning the results may not be fully representative, and the majority of the women who participated were aged above 60, so the findings may not be generalisable to younger army personnel.

Nevertheless, the authors conclude that their study provides evidence of a high prevalence of military adversity among UK women veterans and highlights important relationships with sociodemographic factors and mental health difficulties that require further investigation.

There is an urgent need to provide more support to military women, they say. "Many women do not report adverse service experiences due to fear of the consequences of doing so and may continue to suffer from increased mental health distress during and after military service. It is essential to consider whether current reporting procedures may not provide sufficient confidentiality to encourage women to report adverse experiences and more appropriate disclosing procedures should be considered.

"Furthermore, it is essential to consider whether existing support is adequate to support the [mental health](#) needs of [women](#) who experienced military adversity."

As certain characteristics of the military, such as gender discrepancies, the nature of military training and the ranked order structure, may put female personnel at greater risk of victimisation, it is worth considering whether organisational and leadership changes can be made to better protect [military women](#), they add.

More information: Adversity during military service: the impact of military sexual trauma, emotional bullying and physical assault on the mental health and well-being of women veterans, *BMJ Military Health*, [DOI: 10.1136/bmjmilitary-2021-001948](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjmilitary-2021-001948)

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