

# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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## How Do We Truly See Women in Service?

### The Consequences of Looking but Not Seeing

*By Lt Col Andy Child (RIFLES)*

*Women in Defence series*

In the military, we pride ourselves on the importance of our people, their professionalism, and the success of our operations. Meticulous planning, attention to detail, and our people's welfare are at the heart of who we are. But up until very recently some of our operational planning and routine management have not always accounted for, or even acknowledged, some basic human needs of our servicewomen. I have myself been guilty of this ignorance and I now recognise how blind spots regarding women's health have resulted in a failure to fully consider one of our own. We must now address these issues by better educating ourselves and making the necessary cultural changes to make sure that we truly see and support our servicewomen. This will enable them to fulfil their potential and it will improve our overall operational effectiveness.

#### **Why we need to open our eyes to servicewomen's needs**

Servicewomen are not new to the UK Armed Forces and since 2018 all Armed Forces roles, including infantry and special forces, were opened to women. The evidence shows that

employing women in combat roles increases resilience, enhances diversity of thought, and boosts operational effectiveness. As CGS highlighted, you 'don't need to be laddish to be lethal' (RUSI Land Warfare Conference, June 2022) and we need to be more intelligent than restricting our frontline military judgement and focus on physical strength. Unfortunately, there has not been a persistent nor consistent narrative on how best to integrate women and the message has landed unevenly across the Army. Some regiments and cultures have adjusted but there are others that are more stubborn. Biasing the physical component of fighting power, even in frontline roles, over the conceptual and moral does not result in better operational effectiveness. Balancing capabilities and increased representation across the whole force is needed more than ever in our complex security environment, which includes the cyber and space operational domains, and where peacekeeping and crisis management are essential.

The 2021, the Report on Women in the Armed Forces highlighted the persistence of significant barriers for women in Defence. These include bullying, sexual harassment and sexual violence, and unmet health needs. These barriers act as an obstacle to recruitment, retention and advancement of servicewomen and they affect operational effectiveness. As part of the response to the Report, the Servicewomen's Health Improvement Focus Team (SHIFT) was launched to improve the lived experience of servicewomen across the Armed Forces. I provided a male commander's perspective for the team and through this work I was shocked to realise how blind we have been to the basic needs of our servicewomen.

Considering servicewomen's needs will not erode combat prowess, as some people worry. Instead, it will allow the entire organisation to be more operationally effective. On operations, all service personnel must be at their best and it is the commanders' duty to ensure that they have the kit, equipment, and provisions to do so. I am aware that some think that we are now over-prioritising efforts to support women in the workplace. In my view, this attitude is naïve and wrong. We would not ignore that 15 or 20% of our equipment was not functioning properly. Are we really willing to accept that 15 or 20% of our personnel will be compromised in reaching their full potential? Servicewomen are not looking for special treatment, but we need to see and support their perfectly healthy human needs in the same way that we do for our men. We owe all our people the same consideration, it is that simple.

### **The obstacles servicewomen face**

Many of the barriers are easily overcome through basic considerations and planning. For example, lack of adequate toilet and sanitary facilities impact servicewomen. The thought of not being able to go to the toilet when conducting your normal job seems crazy. Yet in many military environments this is the case for servicewomen. Often, they have limited or no access to adequate facilities or simply to basic privacy because planning considered only male requirements i.e. wild toilet facilities are fine. As a result, many servicewomen apparently intentionally dehydrate to avoid needing to urinate. This potentially increases the risk of heat illness, cognitive impairment, and reduces their physical endurance.

Similarly, servicewomen have for decades, been managing periods in the military environment without any support. I have been on numerous deployments where only two pairs of anti-bacterial underwear were issued. This is not sufficient for women who menstruate, who need more underwear as well as privacy and access to washing facilities. Only recently have menstrual supply boxes (MSB) been introduced to help servicewomen

manage periods if they have an unexpected bleed or their personal supplies have been compromised when working in austere environments. The chain of command and servicewomen can now access menstrual waste pouches to enable discreet and hygienic disposal of used period products, but for decades we have expected our servicewomen to simply improvise and get on with it. We have failed to support them yet make great effort to ensure our troops maintain their health and hygiene elsewhere.

As a junior commander I was unaware of the challenges for servicewomen relating to managing urination, periods, breastfeeding and the menopause. The only time I ever received female-specific hygiene advice was on deployments to the jungle when periods were discussed, and it was explained that the tropical conditions could make female hygiene and sanitation more challenging. Yet I now know women potentially face similar challenges in many other military contexts I have operated in alongside them. As commanders we need to recognise these factors and see things from a servicewoman's perspective. This is not distracting from the priority of delivering operational effect, it is enhancing it.

Some barriers require more resource, such as the design of military equipment and uniform, but these are just as critical. Military kit is designed for the male body, and even then, it doesn't suit all – only in recent years have we increased the range of sizes available. We won't have tailored for all, but basic body geometry must be catered for and female uniform provision is inadequate – we wouldn't ask our men to complete infantry combat courses wearing kit designed for women! Military-issued bras are somewhat of a novelty item for Army recruits and not issued to trained servicewomen, yet we know they are essential for good breast health. These shortfalls in kit affect servicewomen's individual safety, security, and dignity. The impact of not truly seeing and supporting our servicewomen is much greater than the sole piece of ill-fitting kit, it affects how they are treated and the culture we operate within.

### **Identifying and addressing blind spots**

As a male military leader, I do not know enough about these issues, and until now I have not really been asked to engage with them. Through ignorance, naivety or chosen behaviour, I believe that we disadvantage our servicewomen because of our blind spots or thoughtlessness to their needs. The issues have been accepted as simply something servicewomen had to manage by themselves. Fortunately, in some cases there is a relatively easy fix or opportunity to at least alleviate them; we just need to make minor adjustments to planning considerations to simply recognise basic human needs. We spend our careers being trained to consider all the factors that will enable success on operations. This includes learning endless checklists with endless acronyms about how to get the best from our equipment. As a Commander you could lose your job for failure to ensure the security and safety of kit. Yet we do not have the same checklists for looking after our people. Maybe that is because we all think we know how to look after all our people, but do we? Is it time for a checklist that reminds us to open our eyes and think about servicewomen's specific needs?

In most cases, if the blind spots are brought to our attention, most of us are usually willing to address them and to correct them. But we must do better and engage actively with personal issues we may not feel initially comfortable discussing. The cultural change needed to support the minority of servicewomen in a predominantly masculine environment will remain a challenge. During my work with SHIFT, I have often heard that servicewomen do not feel able to raise issues, even when it comes to their basic human needs. They worry it

will be dismissed as ‘women’s problems’ or that it will reinforce the bias of those who think that women do not belong in defence; they fear unwanted attention. I have also been surprised by some senior servicewomen, who despite previously facing inequalities now question the need for change; they argue ‘I managed’. Whilst we should recognise that many servicewomen in the past have adapted and succeeded, this is not an excuse for continued inaction. We cannot let ‘the old ways’ be an excuse for the blind spots to endure. We would not accept this for our equipment or tactics, techniques or procedures. We must always adapt to be better on all fronts.

## Conclusion

As commanders, we must be proactive and become aware of all issues that can affect the performance of team members. We have a duty to educate ourselves about potential blindspots and normalise conversations around servicewomen’s needs, for servicewomen and for our operational effectiveness. We must also guard against virtue signalling or token representation as this will undermine genuine efforts. Less visible education will enable true behavioural and cultural change. Male leaders can be empathetic but cannot necessarily know the impact of all their decisions and plans for servicewomen. That is okay, because we do not need to understand every personal detail, but we must not assume that because a plan accommodates male needs it will meet all servicewomen’s needs. We must feel comfortable asking questions and red-teaming ourselves to ensure we have looked at it from a servicewoman’s perspective. My advice is not to feel embarrassed to discuss issues relating to servicewomen’s health. Avoiding the conversations benefits no one. We must enable our workforce to instinctively think women, thereby allowing decisions to be uncontentious and normal.

Our differences are what make us brilliant so regardless of who we are or who we work with, we must educate ourselves and consider the basic needs of all of our service personnel. If you have not done so already, it is time to start having these conversations. Not everyone will feel comfortable with this but by being respectfully curious, we can identify blind spots and address many of these issues.

## Questions

- Do your planning assumptions take into account all basic human needs?
- Do you understand how women’s health needs differ from men’s health?
- Do you carry any biases towards women? Think how this can reduce your ability to operate effectively.
- Fair treatment isn’t the same as ignoring underperformance. How can we strike the right balance?

## Resources

[A timeline of women in the Army](#), National Army Museum, London.

MoD, [‘Women in ground close combat \(GCC\) Review Paper’](#), 19 Dec 14.

Defence Committee - House of Commons, [‘Protecting those who protect us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life’](#), 22 Jul 21.

Criado Perez, C., *Invisible Women: Exposing the data bias in a world designed for men*, Vintage, 2020.

MoD SharePoint:

- Wg Cdr Jemma Austin, [‘To pee or not to pee?’](#)
- Wg Cdr Jemma Austin, [‘Mud and blood’](#)
- Cdr Jenna Kelway, [‘It’s getting hot in here... Menopause in the Armed Forces’](#)
- Cdr Laura Parker, [‘Avoiding the boobie-trap. The Defence Breastfeeding Policy’](#)
- Lt Col Anne Fieldhouse and Dr Sophie Arana, [‘Code Red: Knowing how and when to help’](#)
- Lt Col Andy Child, [‘Do we truly see women in service?’](#)
- Baroness Goldie, [‘Why I’m so proud of the new women’s health and wellbeing policies’](#)