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Removing the Barriers to the Successful Recruitment and Retention of Servicewomen

by Dr Ellen Joan Nelson

Women in Defence series

In October 2020, five weeks after giving birth to my second child, I presented at a New Zealand Army conference about building a gender inclusive Army. I breastfed my baby, Monty, while presenting, and was accompanied by my then three-year-old son, Toby. At the conference, I presented the findings of both my doctoral research, which focused on the leadership experiences and social well-being of women officers who had left the NZ Army, as well as a subsequent piece of research that focused on the barriers to the recruitment and retention of women in the NZ Army across all ranks. I interviewed women in their 20s and 30s and asked about their experiences serving in the Army. Overall, the women I interviewed loved their time in the military, which also reflects my own experience as an Engineer officer. However, my inductive, thematic analysis revealed that there were recurring themes of gender-based challenges, which affected recruitment, advancement, and retention of women.

Plans to recruit more women and to prepare them for senior roles often tend to focus on 'fixing' the individual women. There are 'women in leadership' courses, women's networking groups, coaching for women, courses for women (especially mothers) to manage their competing priorities, and programs to increase women's confidence. These are good offerings, they add value, and they are needed. However, these are band aids. If organisations are serious about increasing the representation of women, they must stop looking at 'fixing' women and start reforming the structures and processes that are imposing barriers to the advancement of women. The exciting part is that changing these structures will *also* be good for men and it will *also* improve organisational performance.

According to my research, there are several barriers facing women in the Army.

1. **Representation.** My analysis of NZ Army's recruiting videos (1990s and 2000s) and of videos and images used on the NZ Army careers website (2018-2019) show that less than 10% of the images were of women. With the NZ Army sitting at around 13% women, and a goal to get to 30%, it was disappointing to see so few women in the recruiting material. Further, when women were included, they were typically depicted doing sedentary or administrative tasks. Not a single woman was portrayed with camouflage cream on her face or firing a weapon. The saying 'you can't be what you can't see' rings true. To attract women, it is essential that girls see role models in the recruiting material.
2. **Uniforms, equipment, and infrastructure.** The research found that the NZ Army has only one version of camouflage and physical training uniform and it is designed for a man. Further, while there is a woman's version of service dress and mess kit, most of the women found it to be unflattering and unprofessional to wear. While the men's service dress is effectively a green equivalent of a businessman's suit, and the mess kit a red equivalent of what a civilian man would wear to a black-tie event, the same certainly cannot be said for the women's uniforms as they do not reflect what a civilian woman would wear in a business or formal environment. There were also challenges when it came to body armour, webbing and packs designed for men's bodies, and a lack of women's ablutions in some units. It is important to ensure there are uniforms, equipment, and infrastructure to suit all genders. Requiring women to wear uniforms designed for men is quite literally requiring them to 'fit in' to the organisation and is a sign that the organisation does not see or value the specific needs of servicewomen.
3. **Authentic leadership.** Many of the servicewomen I interviewed felt that the leadership approach that was taught and required in the NZ Army was narrow. The organisation typically valued decisive, aggressive, regimental and stern leadership attributes. This approach did not come naturally to more than 90% of the women, who felt their authentic approach to leadership was more inclusive, collaborative and relationship-focused. The women I interviewed felt that they were regularly criticised for exercising their authentic leadership approach and personality traits such as care, friendliness or empathy. They were admonished even though there is a wealth of literature that proves that these traits are often associated with effective leaders. What this meant is that women either (a) tried to be someone they were not and often tried to become more 'masculine' in their approach, which would eventually wear them down or (b) would get worn down by the constant criticism for being themselves. Neither are good outcomes for the individual leader, for the team they lead, or for the organisation. I am convinced there is no set way to lead, and that each leader must build on their own personal leadership traits, which are unique. If units and training establishments can support their soldiers and officers to be authentic in their approach, everyone will benefit.
4. **Judgement around personal relationships.** My research found that women felt they faced a higher degree of scrutiny about their social and sexual relations. Interviewees reported multiple examples of women being shamed, bullied, reprimanded, and even disciplined because of their sexual choices. This approach had direct consequences on their careers, with often damaging long-term effects. The women I interviewed felt that their male colleagues did not have to undergo similar scrutiny. There are of course circumstances where close personal relationships in the military are not appropriate, for example when there is a power imbalance due to being part of the same chain of command, or in a trainer/trainee setting. Outside of these specific situations, however, personal or sexual relationships should remain a private matter.

5. **Gender discrimination and sexism.** The surveys revealed countless examples of women experiencing covert and overt gender discrimination and sexism. The more subtle examples included men acknowledging the views of other men yet ignoring women's voices. Overt examples were also disappointingly frequent, with male senior officers telling female staff members that 'this isn't a role for a woman', or 'your husbands' career will need to come first', or 'you should be at home with the kids' and more. These attitudes undermine the morale and self-confidence of the individual and they weaken the unit's cohesion and performance.
6. **Sexual harassment and assault.** My research and a survey of reports into the UK and US armed forces reveal that sexual harassment and sexual assault are frighteningly prevalent. It appears that units that tolerate 'lower level' sexual harm, such as sexually degrading comments, tend to experience higher incidents of serious sexual harm, including rape. Evidence shows that when one 'bad egg' gets away with making sexually offensive comments towards women in a group setting, there is an increased likelihood that more serious sexual harm will be perpetrated in that unit. It is therefore important to 'nip it in the bud' when it comes to sexual harm and to adopt a 'no tolerance' approach. It is also important to note that sexual violence remains overwhelmingly underreported due to the fear of backlash and other negative ramifications like the of feeling of isolation and being made to feel like an administrative burden. Worryingly, some women have talked about the backlash being worse than the incident itself. It is essential to establish safe channels, outside of the chain of command, for people to report sexual harm and to access the support they need.
7. **Maternity.** Many women experienced negative attitudes about their pregnancy and felt pressured to perform physical activities that were not safe for them and their unborn child. Parental leave often felt isolating, with many mothers feeling forgotten. The women I interviewed discussed a wide range of experiences during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum. At one end of the spectrum were the women who were healthy and physically active during their pregnancy. They had a relatively uncomplicated birth and spoke about having an 'easy' baby, who was healthy and generally slept and fed well. They often also had support from the other parent, as well as other family members and friends. They shed the 'baby weight' quickly and were back into exercise within a few months of giving birth. These mothers had no trouble passing their military fitness tests upon return to work. However, less than a quarter of the new mothers could be assigned to this category. The majority, in fact just over three quarters, were somewhere towards the opposite end of the spectrum. They had significant health issues during their pregnancy. They were not able to maintain physical activity during the pregnancy and some gained a lot of weight. Many of the women also experienced a range of birth complications and some suffered significant injuries during childbirth. Many of the women spoke about ongoing injuries related to childbirth such as vaginal prolapse, pelvic floor pain, incontinence, infected c-section wound and back pain. Many had limited support at home. In some cases, the partner was deployed or regularly away on exercise. Some of the new-borns had health issues, difficulty in feeding and trouble sleeping. These factors caused additional fatigue and stress for the new mothers. Exercise during maternity leave did not occur and returning to unit PT postpartum was challenging. Units should therefore provide personalised support to women during their pregnancy, parental leave, and post-partum return periods. It should be recognised that not all women have the same personal experience and they should not be

expected to 'bounce back' immediately. A tailored approach would ensure women receive the support they need, which in turn would boost retention and operational effectiveness.¹

8. **Logistical challenges of parenting.** It is often taken for granted that all military parents have a dedicated stay-at-home partner to care for the children. This is not the reality of the world today and if the Army is serious about supporting all its service personnel, it must think differently about how best to support them. I have discussed this matter in a separate CAL Insight (No. 32), to be published shortly.

Conclusion

The need to increase the number of women in defence is acknowledged as a means to enhance operational effectiveness in an ever-complex security environment. In addition, making sure that all service personnel feel valued and included has a direct impact on morale, team cohesion, and overall institutional performance.

The military was originally designed by men for men. Over time, women have been 'permitted' to join. Some 'accommodations' and 'allowances' have been made. However, in many cases there has not been a deep-rooted acceptance that women belong in the Army. The results of my research suggest that there is still a long way to go for women to be truly valued and included. This comes down to an organisational culture where there are still significant pockets of resistance, and a radical cultural change is needed. This can only be achieved through leadership.

My own recommendations are not too dissimilar from those put forward by the Atherton Report (2021). Poor behaviour, sexism and harassment must become unacceptable at all levels. Incidents must be reported and acted upon swiftly and fairly via clear and unambiguous policies and procedures. Kits and equipment must be built to fit female bodies and to respond to women's specific requirements. More generally, measures must be put in place to value the contribution that women make to the organisation and to its operations. Ultimately, women must be made to feel as an integral part of the Army not as an after-thought.

Questions

1. As a leader, how are you supporting servicewomen?
2. What are you doing to change the organisational culture around the issues outlined in this Insight?
3. How comfortable do you feel being completely yourself at work, and how are you supporting others to be authentic leaders?

Sources

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¹ As I interviewed servicewomen in their 20s and 30s, issues like perimenopause, menopause and post-menopause were not discussed in the interviews although evidence shows that they are equally important factors in determining motivation and retention.