LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and to further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience. Leadership Insights are published periodically by the CAL to feed and shape the leadership debate within the Army through a range of themes and ideas designed to inform and challenge its readership. The views expressed in Leadership Insights are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official thinking of the British Army or the Ministry of Defence. Series Editor: Dr Linda Risso.

British Army Culture and the Female Leadership Styles

An In-depth Analysis

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The British Army is known by the public for its hierarchical structure and deeply entrenched culture. Its traditions and leadership principles have been passed down through generations, reinforcing values such as courage and discipline. However, as the UK military navigates towards greater inclusivity, questions arise about the impact of Army culture on diversity and inclusion and particularly on female leadership. This *Insight* is derived from research that I carried out as part of my leadership and development postgraduate degree.[1] It explores the ways in which British Army culture influences female leadership styles and it investigates the challenges and opportunities for women in leadership positions across the organisation. By examining these issues through a comprehensive thematic analysis, this *Insight* seeks to illuminate the gendered dynamics of military leadership and offer insights for enhancing inclusivity and thus boosting organisational performance.

The primary aim of this research study is to fill a gap in the existing literature by addressing two research questions: to define the nature of British Army leadership culture and to understand how this culture influences female leadership across the organisation. The research is based a survey of ninety-seven female participants ranging in rank from Private Soldier to Brigadier. The survey's core findings where then further explored during interviews with senior female leaders. This approach provided rich insights into the lived experiences of Service Personnel and the practical realities of women's leadership within the Army's cultural framework.

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[1] Stafford, D. D. (2024). *Leadership, Gender and the British Army: British Army Cultural Influences upon female leadership.* Defence Academic Research Environment (DARE).

British Army Culture: Tradition, Hierarchy, and Masculine Norms

British Army culture is strongly influenced by tradition, hierarchy, and a commitment to service. As we know, strong value is placed on rank and discipline, with a clear expectation of adherence to an established code of conduct. In general terms, the Army's culture is viewed positively for its high standards of service, yet this adherence to traditional values also creates resistance to change. The hierarchical structure emphasises a rigid command-and-control dynamic, which can hinder the organisation's ability to adapt to modern cultural shifts, particularly regarding gender inclusivity (Sharp 2021).

Despite efforts to modernise, such as the *Army's Plan for Improving Our Organisational Culture, 2023-2028* (APIOC) and the work carried out by the Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) via the publication of the *Army Leadership Doctrine* (2021) and the *Leader Competency Framework* (2024), the Army culture remains predominantly male-dominated, due to low female representation, which, at the time of writing is sitting at 10.5% (Gov.uk 2025). Culturally, traits that are often seen as 'masculine' are highly valued within military leadership roles. Assertiveness, decisiveness, and competitiveness for example are seen as essential qualities of effective leaders and recognised within military leadership (Dunn, 2007: Field & Nagl, 2001: Herrera, et al, 2012). This masculine hegemony not only perpetuates gender stereotypes but also creates barriers for women, who often find themselves needing to conform to these male-dominated norms to succeed (Eagly and Johnson, 2002).

The Army's culture can therefore be seen as both positive – in the sense that it has a clear path for development – and toxic – as it does not allow room for different leadership styles and approaches. On one hand, it fosters a sense of duty, belonging and collective identity among personnel. On the other hand, it can lead to negative outcomes, like emotional suppression, high levels of stress, and excessive competitiveness. The research I have carried out identifies significant challenges for women in navigating this environment, particularly in for those in senior leadership roles. Female leaders are often expected to adopt 'masculine' traits to be seen as credible. This often leads to emotional suppression and internalised pressures to conform to an idealised leadership standard that aligns with traditional, hyper-masculine norms. The current evaluation and promotion system also seem to reinforce this trend as it based on outcome-driven metrics to the detriment of less tangible traits like emotional intelligence, authenticity, personal connection with the team, pastoral support, mentoring and coaching. Yet, things are changing, and the data illustrates a complex and multifaceted organisational culture that is undergoing gradual transformation. The publication of the *Leader Competency Framework*, for example, is a welcome breath of fresh air as it is evident that a more holistic approach to leader's evaluation is taking foot across the organisation.

Cultural Conformity and the 'Double Bind'

According to the research findings, both male and female leaders are held to high standards of professionalism and accountability, *shaped* by the Army's values and culture. However, the evidence gathered during this research suggest that expectations of how leaders should behave differ significantly based on gender. Male leaders are often expected to display assertiveness and decisiveness, qualities that align with the Army's traditional leadership model. These traits are perceived as essential for success within the hierarchical structure, and men who demonstrate them are generally seen as competent leaders.

While women are expected to exhibit similar leadership competencies, they are also judged more harshly when they display assertiveness. Female leaders are often labelled as 'bossy' or 'moody' when they assert authority and often feel pushed to overcompensate for their gender by adopting a stricter, more autocratic leadership style (Gartzia and Van Engen, 2012). This pattern is consistently reflected in our data, with respondents to our survey noting that "some women try to 'out-men' the men" and that they "tried to fit in and emulate people around [them]." The research also highlighted that female leaders are capable of applying an adaptable leadership style, adjusting their approach based on the people they lead and the situation at hand. This adaptability is seen as a necessary response to the rigid, male-dominated environment, and often allows leaders to connect with individuals and to harness the potential of their team. While this flexible style can be effective in fostering collaboration and teamwork, it also exposes women to criticism, particularly when they deviate from the traditional male-centric leadership model.

The problem is that female leaders are expected to demonstrate greater emotional intelligence and empathy, while at the same time being asked to be decisive, assertive and driven. They are being torn by opposite demands and expectations and – as many interviewees mentioned – feel bound to fail either way. This dilemma is called the 'double bind,' a term used to describe the conflicting expectations placed on women in leadership roles. On the one hand, women are expected to exhibit the traits traditionally associated with effective leadership, such as assertiveness and decisiveness. On the other hand, as argued above, when women display these traits, they are often labelled negatively, as 'bossy', 'aggressive' or 'unfeminine' (Gartzia and Van Engen, 2012). As a result, female leaders often find themselves caught between the need to conform to masculine leadership norms and the need to retain their authentic leadership style (Dunn 2008). The military hierarchical culture, which values command and control, does not have room to appreciate, and often even undermines any more nuanced approach, creating tension between the need for empathy and this pressure to conform to an assertive, masculine leadership style. It should be noted however that this dilemma is not unique to the Army, and it affects female leaders across multiple sectors (Eagly and Johnson, 2002).

The double bind is exacerbated by the Army's cultural norms, which reinforce the ideal of the hyper-masculine, authoritative leader. Women who attempt to lead in a way that deviates from this model often face resistance, not only from male colleagues but also from female peers who have internalised these norms often face isolation and criticism. This dynamic creates a situation where female leaders are forced to adapt their leadership style to fit into a narrowly defined and culturally entrenched model of leadership. The research found that this process of cultural conformity is detrimental to female leaders, as it stifles the development of diverse leadership styles and perpetuates gendered expectations.

The data also highlights the scarcity of female role models in senior leadership positions compounding this issue. With few women in very senior leadership roles, younger female leaders often struggle to envision themselves in these positions and lack the guidance and mentorship needed to navigate the complex challenges of military leadership. This lack of representation can have long-term consequences for women's career advancement and the overall inclusivity of the Army.

The British Army and Organisational Change

The British Army is undergoing a period of significant cultural change, with efforts to increase diversity and inclusion. However, these efforts are often met with resistance from those who view cultural change as a threat to the established norms and values of the institution. Qualitative analysis of the information gathered during this research suggest that this resistance is particularly pronounced in the case of gender, where traditional notions of what constitutes good leadership are still deeply ingrained. The study highlights the need for a more intersectional approach to understanding leadership within the Army. While gender is a critical factor, it is not the only determinant of leadership success. Other factors, such as race, socio-economic background, and sexual orientation, also play a significant role in shaping leadership experiences within the Army. Future research should explore these intersections to provide a more nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics and further support the Army's efforts to create a more inclusive and diverse leadership culture.

To build a more inclusive and effective leadership culture, the British Army should begin by redefining what constitutes successful leadership. This involves revising evaluation and promotion criteria to recognise qualities such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, and team empowerment alongside traditional traits like assertiveness and command. The *Leader Competency Framework* (2024) is an important step in this direction as it put forward a more articulated definition of leadership which opens new space for different approaches and leadership traits. Promoting diverse role models, women and leaders of varying backgrounds and leadership styles can help challenge existing stereotypes and offer more relatable examples of leadership. Formal mentorship and sponsorship structures are essential to support the development and retention of underrepresented groups, especially at critical transition points in their careers. Leadership training should incorporate inclusive practices, such as adaptive leadership and psychological safety, to foster a more collaborative and responsive command environment. Additionally, the Army must cultivate a culture of open dialogue around gender norms, leadership expectations, and inclusion, supported

by senior leaders and facilitated in safe, reflective spaces. An intersectional approach should guide these efforts, recognising how gender intersects with race, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation in shaping leadership experiences, critical for operational and organisational success. Finally, the Army should continuously evaluate the impact of modernisation initiatives, while also measuring long-term outcomes such as recruitment, retention, and performance, particularly among women, to ensure that cultural reforms translate into meaningful organisational change.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the British Army's entrenched masculine norms continue to shape leadership expectations and create challenges for female leaders. While some initiatives like the publication of the _Leader Competency Framework_ demonstrate progress, a deep-rooted culture of conformity and traditionalism still limits leadership diversity and authenticity, where Female leaders continue to face challenges related to gendered expectations and the 'double bind.' These challenges hinder their ability to lead authentically and effectively, while also limiting the Army's capacity to harness the full potential of its leadership. By embracing a broader definition of leadership and implementing structural reforms that promote inclusivity, the Army has an opportunity to build a leadership culture that is more reflective of its personnel and more suited to today's complex operational demands. Advancing these changes will not only support female leaders but also enhance the Army's overall effectiveness, resilience, and alignment with contemporary defence values**.**

Questions:
1.   In what ways have I personally experienced or witnessed the influence of masculine norms in leadership settings (military or civilian)? How did these dynamics affect inclusivity or leadership effectiveness?
2.   How do I perceive the concept of the 'double bind' in leadership? Have I seen or experienced scenarios where individuals were penalised for not conforming to dominant leadership norms?
3.   What assumptions do I hold about effective leadership traits? How might these be shaped by cultural or institutional traditions—and do they support or hinder diversity?
4.   What practical steps can I take in my own leadership style or environment to support and promote authentic leadership from individuals of all genders and backgrounds?

Resources:

Army's Plan for Improving Our Organisational Culture, _2023-2028_ (APIOC).
Army Leadership Doctrine (2021).
Leader Competency Framework (2024).
UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics: October 2024, Published 23 January 2025.
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