

Women are suffering serious and long-lasting physical and mental health problems from “widespread” emotional bullying, sexual harassment and physical assault in the UK military, research reveals.

Those most likely to have experienced such treatment were younger personnel, those who have held the rank of officer or had a combat or combat support role, according to findings published in the BMJ [Military Health](#) journal.

Of 750 female veterans surveyed, 22.5% said they had been sexually harassed, while 5.1% said they had been sexually assaulted. Emotional bullying was inflicted on 22.7% of those women, while 3.3% said they had been physically assaulted.

Researchers found that sexual harassment in the forces was sparking physical somatisation, where mental distress causes women to suffer physical symptoms such as pain or fatigue.

Sexual assault is leading to alcohol problems, while emotional bullying is triggering anxiety, depression and loneliness, according to the research by the University of Oxford, King’s College London and the charity Combat Stress.

All types of bad treatment left the women at higher risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, and different types of adversity had specific impacts on women’s mental health and wellbeing.

About 16,500 women are serving in the UK military, where they make up approximately 11% of personnel. All roles were opened up to them, including deployment to frontline combat, in 2018.

The researchers believe the findings show there is an urgent need to provide more support to military women.

Sexual harassment was “significantly” linked to a situation where the women found themselves in pain or fatigued owing to the mental distress.

The research also found that sexual assault could result in women having “a greater risk of alcohol difficulties”, while emotional bullying left them with issues such as anxiety, depression, low social support and loneliness.

The study found that women who held a rank as an officer were at greater risk of sexual harassment as well as emotional bullying, but the scientists also state that “even women holding higher power positions may be at risk of victimisation from their own superiors”.

Since women are in the minority in the military “it cannot be ruled out that victimisation of women holding higher ranks may be perpetrated by their own peers as well as those in lower ranks”.

The researchers cautioned that no firm conclusions could be drawn about cause and effect behind their findings as it was an observational study and further research was needed. The study was based around

self-reported events, which means it could underestimate or overestimate the true picture of what was experienced.

But they added: “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.”

They said that it might be worth considering whether organisational and leadership changes could be made to better protect military women. “Furthermore, it is essential to consider whether existing support is adequate to support the mental health needs of women who experienced military adversity,” they added.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Defence said: “[We] do not tolerate abuse, bullying, harassment or discrimination.

“We have taken a range of steps to improve the experiences of women in our armed forces, as we continue to do for all serving personnel. This includes launching a 24/7 confidential and independent whole-force bullying, harassment and discrimination helpline with trained advisors to support personnel.

“All allegations are taken very seriously, with unlawful behaviour investigated by the relevant police service as necessary.”

Source: [Revealed: scale of abuse and sexual harassment of women in UK military](#)