

Female Leadership in the Military Context: Exploring Complexities

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Leadership remains a cornerstone of UK military capability, yet the understanding and teaching of the complexities of female leadership in the military context remains limited.

This lack of understanding represents an opportunity for applied research; although many of the structural barriers to female integration and leadership opportunities within the UK Armed Forces have been removed, women continue to be underrepresented and face real or perceived disadvantages at all levels. Indeed, despite the championing of diverse thinking within the Armed Forces and the recognition of the need for gender mainstreaming in senior appointments, training programmes and gendered perspectives in operations (See the UK's [National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security](#)), training and understanding of female leadership remains underexplored and underexploited for operational advantage. Moreover, clumsy policies (unofficial or not) that try to increase female recruitment and or advancement (Beale, 2022) could prove to do more damage than good, however well intentioned.

The need for better understanding of female leadership and gendered perspectives, while always important, has become more significant since Ground Close Combat roles were opened to women in the UK Armed Forces in 2016 and in response to the House of Commons Select Committees Report into Women's experiences of life in the UK military in 2021. The HCSC report noted that women are a minority within leadership positions, describing women's advancement within the Forces as "glacial" with, as of April 2021, only 5.2% of senior officers or starred ranks (OF-6 to OF-9¹) and 13.9% of all other officers being female. This compares poorly with figures from civilian life as shown in the Cranfield School of Management [Female FTSE Board Report](#) (Vinnicombe and Tessaro, 2022).

Indeed, while much research has been conducted on female leadership in civilian life little has been conducted on how societal expectations and cultural norms can affect women's leadership experiences and promotion prospects in the UK context of regular and reserve military service.

Research has been conducted on female marines in the US, and several studies have sought to unpick comparative gendered leadership traits and stereotypes. There are also a few studies that have been conducted on the consequences of the integration of women into combat roles within the US and Israeli Armed Forces, but while these studies are useful in helping to develop a broad understanding of how women have been amalgamated into regular and reserve military forces, they are limited due to national historical cultural differences. They are therefore not necessarily transferable to the UK or even the European/ broader NATO context.

As a result of the limited available research, an international perspective and an interdisciplinary approach has been adopted to review existing literature into female military leadership. The aim is two-fold: firstly, to identify key research themes in this area and secondly, to find gaps in the literature to explore persistent cultural and historical barriers to female advancement. In saying this it is important to reiterate that direct international comparisons of female involvement in Armed Forces, or combat more generally, can be problematic. Not only do country specific militaries have different experiences which are culturally and historically specific, there are also different contingent factors at play between regular, reserve, and irregular forces. Moreover, what constitutes combat roles versus non-combat roles can also differ significantly.

¹ OF-6 Commodore/Brigadier/Air Commodore, OF-7 Rear Admiral/Major-General/Air Vice Marshall, OF-8 Vice Admiral/Lieutenant-General/Air Marshall, OF-9 Admiral/General/Air Chief Marshall.

For the purposes of this article the term Ground Close Combat (GCC) will be adopted in line with UK policy as “roles that are primarily intended and designed with the purpose of requiring individuals on the ground, to close with and kill the enemy” (Ministry of Defence, 2014, para 10).

On reviewing the literature, a notable point is that leadership within militaries is not confined to commissioned ranks, however research into leadership tends to focus on officers or officer cadets. Reasons for this are unclear but likely reflect ease of access to participants and the hierarchical nature of military environments that associates leadership with rank and a lack of academic criticality or a feminist viewpoint, which results in the dismissal of experiences from non-commissioned personnel in leadership positions. Add to this the dominance of male service personnel and male researchers, and leadership in the military sense becomes almost wholly viewed through a masculine lens that draws on the experiences of male personnel, the feminist voice is underrepresented.

What we know of female leadership is therefore limited and generally restricted to the commissioned cadre. But of course, leadership does not begin or end with rank nor does it operate in a military vacuum. This brings forward the second point to note about female leadership research in the military context.

Many of the studies clearly acknowledge the country specific nature of their research and do not necessarily attempt to make cross country comparisons and generalisations unless specifically stated. However, few studies make explicit historical and cultural behavioural normativities which explain how men and women are regarded, and how social expectations and assumptions extend beyond civilian life into the military environment.

This leads to the second part of this piece which begins to draw together the research themes that recur in the existing literature and suggests opportunities for future research.

Where to Lead - Access to combat operations

Historically, one of the major obstacles to female advancement into senior leadership positions in the military was the denial of access to combat roles which would have given women highly prized operational experience. That the debate as to whether women should have access to these roles has shifted is in no doubt (see Fitriani, Cooper, and Matthews (2016) for a comprehensive overview which ultimately predicted the admission of women into Ground Close Combat roles in 2016).

However, the debate continues in respect of how female integration should be framed and achieved (Brownson, 2016, 2014; King, 2016, 2015). Moreover, US research suggests that despite the opening of GCC roles, occupations continue to be segregated along biologically gendered lines with women continuing to mainly occupy administrative, medical and support jobs while men are predominantly found in infantry, tactical operations and equipment repair (Moore, 2020).

There is little to suggest the same pattern of gendered employment is not repeated here in the UK with consequential effects on career progression. Moreover, the argument that women could be disadvantaged through their failure to take up GCC roles does not seem to have been considered in any great depth, especially as within the UK Armed Forces senior leadership roles continue to be dominated by those with GCC or operational experience.

How to Lead – Leadership Theory and Practice

While the teaching of leadership theory in the UK military has moved from Great Man and Trait theory, room to incorporate female leadership or gendered thinking as valuable contributions to

military operational effectiveness appears to be limited. Indeed, the UK military's preference for equality achieved through gender neutrality could be argued to reflect a position where gender is irrelevant (King, 2015). But such considerations are counter to policies that seek to harness diverse thinking, of which gendered thought is but one example and arguably also blind to social norms. Such a position also fails to appreciate research in the civilian sector, which convincingly argues gender neutrality effectively defaults to the masculine (Acker, 1990). It is therefore unsurprising that female military leadership has received less attention by military theorists and the little literature that exists offers no consensus in respect of an effective approach that could be adopted by potential or in-situ female leaders beyond mimicking their male colleagues (Sasson-Levy, 2003). Indeed, leadership in the military sphere is often associated at its worst with physical fitness and 'loudership', which in military operations has its place, but often neglects effective alternative possibilities.

Instances of female leadership do however exist. One such example from Brownson (2014) involved a display of confidence and coolness from a female Marine in a testosterone filled chaotic operations room, but this appears to be a rare case in an overwhelming masculine body of work. Moreover, Brownson went on to conclude that to be credible leaders' female marines developed tactics to downplay and manage their physicality, sexuality, and femininity to achieve levels of competency, trust and confidence from their colleagues. Again, that this reduces female leaders' ability to provide diversity of thought needs to be considered. In contrast Walker's (2012) research highlighted feminine traits within a model of female leadership designed specifically for the military environment. These traits focused on femininity, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and teamwork and centred on maintaining feminine behaviours. Such contradictory evidence, drawn from empirical sources, confirms female leadership in the military context remains a contested area, one which requires further research.

Measuring – Leadership Performance

Changes to how commissioned and non-commissioned personnel are evaluated have been made to counter performance appraisals which potentially advantaged men, or certain types of men, over women. For example, gone are measures of "appearance and bearing" which rewarded men who replicated physical characteristics of an ideal leaders (tall, muscular etc) and disadvantaged women and other men who did not meet these ideals. In its place can be found metrics which reward more feminine aspects of leadership such as Emotional Intelligence. While this goes some way to reducing potential bias and levelling the promotion playing field it solves only part of the problem. As discussed, research findings relating to female military leadership remains contested with studies both claiming and dismissing distinctions. However, with regards evaluation findings are clearer. In terms of measuring performance and potential servicemen retain an advantage over women regardless of outcomes (Boldry, Wood, and Kashy, 2001). The potential consequences of this are that men are more likely to be chosen for high profile jobs and subsequently more likely to be selected for promotion than their female colleagues.

One suggested method by which such bias could be countered is to de-gender job applications or performance appraisals, removing any sign of the subject name or gender. While this has been proven to re-balance promotion or selection boards by creating anonymous subjects, it may be difficult to successfully implement in the military due to the decreasing numbers of personnel and the subsequent increasing potential for even anonymous subjects to be known to promotion boards. Furthermore, it does little to address the prejudices of the report writer themselves. Smith, Rosenstein, Nikolov, and Chaney (2019) conducted a study on US Naval Academy students that considered the power of language in relation to Gender, Status and Agency in performance

evaluations. They found that “although men and women received similar numbers of descriptive (positive) attributes, women received more proscriptive (negative) attributes than did men and these individual attributes were predominantly feminine”. Such discrepancies they argue, reinforce gender stereotypes that reinforce gender hierarchy’s and potentially hinder women’s aspirations, retention, and ability to be promoted. Such a study suggests better training is required to counter discriminatory writing. But with training budgets reducing, course length both decreasing and moving on-line, challenges for change continue to mount while opportunities seem to decrease.

Length of Service - Exploring the link between Retention and Promotion

In the UK and the US women leave the military earlier than their male colleagues making it less likely that women will reach higher ranks. Research in the US found women do not intend to serve less when they join, suggesting social and or organisational pressures bear more heavily on women than on men at some point in their careers (Smith et al., 2019). Research in the US has also found that women officers are less likely to be married than their male colleagues, they are less likely to have children, and when they are married, they are more likely to be married to a service person than a civilian. Dual military couples, especially those with children, face unique challenges and recognising issues of retention research has been conducted, again in the US context, to provide advice on this issue (Smith and Rosenstein, 2017; Smith and Segal, 2013). Similar findings exist in the UK context (Defence Committee, 2021) and although some measures have been put in place to alleviate pressure such as flexible working and better access to childcare, more research needs to be done in this area. Furthermore, any research and subsequent policies that are developed must understand if it is only women with children that leave early or if other factors are at play and a way must be found to ensure parity across peer groups so one sub-group does not feel disadvantaged or is preferred over another.

Conclusions

Collectively the literature on female leadership in the military environment demonstrates the subject is contested, complex and incompletely understood. Women continue to face obstacles from others and themselves that are not experienced by their male colleagues and advice on how to overcome these challenges is often weak or contradictory. Nevertheless, the current literature provides insight into the challenges faced by female leaders in the military and presents opportunities for further study.

Moreover, the lack of an interdisciplinary approach that could draw on research from the civilian world means many of the lessons that have been learned have been slow to be adopted or adapted to military life. Two arguments are suggested as to why this may be the case. The first suggests parallels are often obscured by the overriding need for military organisations to be brutally effective through a sense of militarism which Samuel Huntington described as the functional imperative. The functional imperative has helped shape Armed Forces the world over, including here in the UK, and has acted to obscure and or subordinate femininity along with female leadership, ensuring a dominant masculine culture remain the status quo. Some academics and commentators have argued this has had negative consequences in terms of operational planning, effectiveness and post-conflict resolutions. Arguably, this was most recently seen in relation to the allied withdrawal from Afghanistan but can be seen in other conflicts from Bosnia to Iraq.

The second argument relates to the nature of scholarship itself. Perhaps scholarship into female leadership is sparse because while scholars in this area, who are predominantly male, have focused on male leaders, feminist scholars have avoided the topic altogether because it runs counter to anti-

war beliefs where any research in this area would be seen to support military endeavour. This approach, it is argued, has been detrimental to the military organisation and all who work in it and are affected by it.

As militaries come to acknowledge the need for diverse thinking and recognise the increased effectiveness such variety of thought can bring to operations there is greater need to understand how traditional Western societal cultures and normativities continue to influence behaviours. This is especially true regarding the UK Armed Forces, who with an emphasis on neutrality, equality, and fairness, coupled with a traditional view of the functional imperative have historically believed they are impervious to the norms and gendered assumptions experienced in civilian life and blind to this aspect of their own organisational culture.

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