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Barriers and facilitators to successfully transitioning to civilian life as an ex-servicewoman in the UK: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Existing literature exploring the experiences of those who have served in the UK Armed Forces has rarely distinguished between whether the experiences of women are distinct from those of men, resulting in limited knowledge of the specific challenges women may face post-service. As the number of women joining the UK Armed Forces is projected to increase, a deeper understanding of their experiences navigating the transition to civilian life is needed. This qualitative study examined the perceived barriers to, and facilitators of, successful military-to-civilian transition among ex-servicewomen in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 31 ex-servicewomen and data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five barriers and five facilitators to a successful transition were identified. Barriers included gendered experiences in the Armed Forces, erasure of the emotional transition, seeking purpose and meaning, a clash of cultures in civilian life and the suitability of support services for women. Facilitators, on the other hand, centred on early preparation for transition, the multi-faceted identities of women, autonomy and control, resilience and shared learning. This study provides one of the first qualitative insights into the specific

experiences of women leaving the UK Armed Forces and sheds light on the enduring impact of experiences in Service. Implications for practice and policy are discussed.

Key Words

Military, ex-servicewomen, veterans, mental health, UK, qualitative methods.

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Author contributions

RK and BC contributed equally to this work. RK and BC conducted participant recruitment and data collection, undertook data analysis and drafted the manuscript. RK, BC, AS and MLS contributed to the interpretation and refinement of the analysis. MLS, NG, NTF and SAMS contributed to the conception and design of the study and provided supervision and critical input throughout the research. All authors critically reviewed the manuscript, contributed to its revision and approved the final version.

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Introduction:

It is estimated that over 11% of the United Kingdom (UK) Armed Forces are women, and this proportion is predicted to continue to rise (Ministry of Defence, 2023). However, the evidence base examining women's experiences of Service and military-to-civilian transition remains limited, with UK research particularly sparse relative to the United States (US) (Smith et al., 2025). Research on the UK Armed Forces has largely been shaped by a predominantly male veteran population (Godier-McBard, 2021), leaving women's distinct experiences, including a higher risk of sexual trauma in the military

and difficulties with integration into the Armed Forces (Smith et al., 2025), comparatively underexplored.

An important focus of Armed Forces research is the transition period, the point at which service personnel leave the military and begin to reintegrate into civilian life. While most service leavers successfully navigate the transition to civilian life, a significant minority may experience challenges related to employment, health, housing and social reintegration (Sharp et al., 2023; Stevelink et al., 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). Both men and women report these difficulties; however, evidence indicates that women may face additional and distinct gender-specific barriers (Baumann et al., 2022; Campbell et al., 2023).

Survey work gives a first indication of scale. In the US, 69% of ex-servicewomen described their transition from military to civilian life as difficult, and only 12% of those who used transition services found them helpful (Fletcher et al., 2022). UK survey data echo this, recording difficulties accessing relevant services among ex-servicewomen who served in the British Army (Baumann et al., 2022). Research indicates that stigma and lack of trust can affect help-seeking for mental health problems among both ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen. While a preliminary UK study found that a significantly higher proportion of women reported that their gender affected their intention to seek help (Godier-McBard, Cable, et al., 2022), a larger subsequent study found no significant gender differences in stigma-related barriers to mental healthcare (Trompeter et al., 2024). Reported barriers extend further to limited access to tailored healthcare, societal perceptions of women in combat roles (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Hendrikx et al., 2023; Wilson, 2018), and the competing demands of family responsibilities alongside post-service life (Godier-McBard, Cable, et al., 2022; Godier-McBard, Gillin, et al., 2022).

Qualitative research suggests these difficulties do not begin at the point of discharge. A recent UK longitudinal study following servicewomen in the Royal Air Force (RAF) through their transition found that gendered experiences during Service shaped both the decision to leave and their subsequent transition (Micklewright & Allen, 2026). The authors found that gendered experiences such as being told motherhood reduced

promotion prospects, alongside everyday sexism, eroded the belief that the military lived up to its own values. Pathways pursued post-military service were often an attempt to rebuild a lost sense of identity, one that for most was incomplete, or emotionally costly rather than a linear transition (Micklewright & Allen, 2026). Our research with service providers and policymakers found no singular definition of a successful transition for ex-servicewomen, but identified gender-specific barriers rooted in misogyny and inequality during Service that permeated into civilian life (Croak et al., 2025).

These gendered experiences need to be better understood if ex-servicewomen are to have equitable access to healthcare, employment and social support, and if veteran care in the UK is to become more inclusive. This aligns with the intent of the Armed Forces Covenant (Ministry of Defence, 2022), which commits to ensuring all ex-service personnel are treated fairly. While recent UK research has begun to document the barriers ex-servicewomen face and the identity disruption they experience during transition (Baumann et al., 2022; Micklewright & Allen, 2026), much less is known about the facilitators and coping strategies that support a successful transition. Our earlier study concluded that this understanding needs to come from ex-servicewomen directly, rather than through the accounts of those who support them (Croak et al., 2025). This paper addresses that gap, presenting findings from in-depth semi-structured interviews with UK ex-servicewomen that explore both the barriers they perceived and the coping strategies they used to navigate the transition from military to civilian life.

Methods:

This research received full ethical clearance from the Health Faculties Research Ethics Subcommittee, King's College London (HR/DP-22/23-33303).

Participants

Participants were recruited who had participated in the fourth phase of the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) Health and Wellbeing Cohort Study (Sharp et al., 2026). This is an ongoing longitudinal study consisting of four research phases

examining the health and wellbeing of serving (Regulars and Reservists) and ex-serving personnel (veterans) who served during the era of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts (Fear et al., 2010; Hotopf et al., 2006; Sharp et al., 2023; Stevelink et al., 2018). Potential participants were identified and invited to participate in this study if they met the following criteria:

- Identified as female
- Aged 18 and over
- Had left the UK Armed Forces

In total, 88 ex-servicewomen were invited, resulting in 29 interviews. An additional two participants who had contacted the research team directly to express interest were recruited after receiving study information and an invitation to participate. These participants contacted the team during the pilot phase or after reading relevant press releases about the project.

Lived experience involvement

Lived experience involvement was embedded throughout the study. An ex-servicewoman was a co-investigator and chaired a lived experience advisory group established specifically for the study, comprising five additional women who had previously served in the UK Armed Forces. Through online meetings and email correspondence, the group contributed to the development of recruitment materials and the interview guide, supported interpretation of the findings, and informed recommendations for policy and practice.

Procedure

Ex-servicewomen who met the criteria for participation were emailed by RK or BC and provided with a study information sheet and a consent form. Interested participants were asked to provide written consent and an interview was arranged over the phone or using Microsoft Teams. All interviews, conducted by RK or BC, took place between

October 2023 and February 2024 and ranged from 20 to 120 minutes. The semi-structured interview guide (Supplementary File 1) was developed based on findings from the existing literature and expert opinion, and refined with input from a lived experience advisory group of ex-servicewomen established specifically for the study. It was tested in the pilot interviews (n=4). The open-ended questions were designed to understand experiences of joining the Armed Forces, time in Service, decisions to leave, the experience of participants as they transitioned to civilian life and their experiences after Service. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the interview topics and the possibility of participant distress during or following the interview, a risk protocol was in place to safeguard both participants and researchers. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent, and participants were provided with a £20 voucher to thank them for their time.

Qualitative Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by an experienced transcriber who had signed a confidentiality agreement with the research team. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by RK and BC and pseudo-anonymised prior to analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis was applied as the analytic framework, following the approach described by Braun et al. (2022), which prioritises the active role of the researcher in meaning-making and the production of a rich, nuanced account of the data.

To analyse the data, RK and BC first familiarised themselves with the data through repeated reading of all transcripts and noting of initial impressions and observations.

Next, RK and BC independently generated an initial set of codes by systematically working through the data and identifying both the explicit content of participants' accounts and the underlying meanings and assumptions these reflected. NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2025) was used to manage and organise the coding process. Whilst the analytic framework was informed by the study's focus on barriers and facilitators to transition, coding within that frame was data-driven, allowing the specific patterns and meanings within each domain to be identified from participants' own accounts rather than imposed from existing theory.

Codes were reviewed and sorted into themes by RK and BC, with related codes grouped together to construct broader patterns of meaning across the dataset. Themes were reviewed and refined, first by checking them against the coded extracts to ensure internal coherence, and then against the full dataset to ensure they gave an accurate and representative account of participants' experiences.

Throughout all phases, regular team debriefs were held involving RK, BC, AS and MLS, during which emerging codes, themes and interpretive decisions were discussed and refined until consensus was reached. Reflexivity was maintained throughout through analytic memos and ongoing discussion of researcher positionality. Both lead analysts (RK and BC) are women with no direct military experience, and it was important to acknowledge that whilst this positioned them as outsiders to the military context, their own lived experiences as women, including navigating gendered environments and experiences of harassment, fostered empathetic engagement with participants' accounts.

Results:

In total, 31 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted. The majority of participants were from England (n=25) and the average age of participants was 48 years old (SD 9.2). Eleven participants had left the Armed Forces within three years of taking part in the interviews and eight had left over ten years prior. Eight participants had served in the Armed Forces for ten years or less, with a median length of Service of 17 years (IQR 10.5–26.5). Figure 1 and Table 1 show additional participant characteristics.

FIGURE 1 HERE

	Mean	**Standard Deviation**	**Min**	**Max**
Age of Participants (Years)	48	9.2	34	73

Length of Service (Years)	19	9.6	6	37
Time Since Leaving the Armed Forces (Years)	7	4.5	1	18

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Themes

A thematic analysis of interview transcripts created 10 themes reflecting both barriers and facilitators to successfully transitioning to civilian life for ex-servicewomen (table 2).

Barriers/Facilitators	Themes
Barriers	Gendered experiences in the Armed Forces
	Erasure of the emotional transition
	Seeking purpose and meaning
	A clash of cultures in civilian life
	Suitability of support services for women
Facilitators	Early preparation for transition
	Multi-faceted identities of women
	Autonomy and control
	Resilience
	Learning through shared experience

Table 2: Themes identified through a thematic analysis

Barriers to successfully transitioning to civilian life

Participants described various barriers encountered during their transition to civilian life. These included emotional challenges associated with leaving the Service and the lack of adequate career support. They also highlighted the long-term impact of their in-service experiences, struggles with post-military identity, and the perception that some support services were inadequate for their needs.

Gendered experiences in the Armed Forces

A majority of participants reported that their in-service experiences functioned as a core barrier to successful transition. They reported that, throughout their careers, they had to work harder than male counterparts to prove themselves, leading to imposter syndrome in civilian life.

> *"You always felt that you were starting five paces behind everybody else. Some of the guys in our class were a complete and utter waste of space but because they looked the part, they were always starting from the start line where we seemed to have to prove that we were allowed to be on the start line." - Emma, Royal Navy, aged 46, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

A minority of participants described harmful behaviours and dynamics in-service, exacerbated by gendered expectations, which they felt consistently undermined their contributions and emotional well-being. These experiences often led to lasting emotional impacts.

> *"When it came to women and a female that was injured was treated with just contempt and as a problem. You are a problem." - Elizabeth, British Army, aged 48, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

Some participants also faced subtle sexual harassment, often disguised as humour. They navigated this perceived normalisation by participating in subjugating language to foster a feeling of belonging and inclusion.

> *"I didn't know any different so I accepted the banter, the sexual innuendos… I had to accept it otherwise I would have been ostracised from that group… They wouldn't trust me as a team player because they'd think is she going to complain about that… So I have to probably say stuff that I probably really didn't agree with just to feel a part, to put them at ease. To say hey you know I'm just one of the lads." Daphne, Royal Air Force, aged 53, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

Over half of those interviewed recalled experiences of sexual harassment and violence during their time in the military, from inappropriate comments to violent assaults, despite no specific question being asked during the interview. These experiences were

pivotal in their decision to leave Service prematurely and had lasting impacts on their health.

> *"That [sexual assault] was very much the pivotal point. I'd always gone into it as the career for life… I ended up getting medically discharged with PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder]." - Ellen, Royal Navy, aged 34, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

The post-service impact of sexual trauma that occurred in a military setting was often viewed as multifaceted; participants shared persistent feelings of self-blame, a lack of trust in the military as an institution, and conscious decisions to withdraw from social interactions while in-service and subsequently in civilian life.

> *"I probably am a lot more careful about letting my guard down at work. Whenever there are social occasions… in some ways I never want to put myself in that position again because it [sexual assault] happened on a social occasion." - Catherine, British Army, aged 35, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

Erasure of the emotional transition

Almost all participants emphasised that irrespective of gender, current transition support focused primarily on practical aspects of transitioning to civilian life, such as employment and housing, neglecting the emotional toll of this life change. While practical advice was helpful, many participants highlighted their psychological challenges.

> *"When you are transitioning, people talk about jobs and houses and those are key. People need money… but the emotional transition I think is probably more important or as important because you are coming from a very structured, very belonging, 31 years of doing something to a new life." - Rose, British Army, aged 57, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

Many felt abandoned by the lack of emotional support during this transition, which led to psychological struggles.

> *"One thing I noticed was when you go for your resettlement training they teach you how to look for a job, how to find a doctors, how to find a dentist. All the*

practical things but not how to deal with it psychologically… You are just left. So it's up to you to find the help… So it is a bit of a culture shock." - Danielle, British Army, aged 57, 11–20 years since leaving Service

Participants expressed conflicting emotions about leaving the military, such as feelings of liberation mixed with sadness. These emotions were often difficult to manage, given the military's culture of suppressing emotions.

"You are not allowed to be sad when you are in the military you just get on with it. I think that must be quite difficult for a lot of people when they leave because they are surrounded by emotions." - Abigail, British Army, aged 53, ≤5 years since leaving Service

Many participants noted that the military's masculine culture discouraged emotional vulnerability, which made adjusting to the emotional aspects of civilian life particularly difficult.

"I would always hate if I got upset because I'd often get upset if I was cross or angry or I felt I'd let myself down or other people down and it's like I would always see it as a sign of weakness." - Alice, Royal Air Force, aged 53, ≤5 years since leaving Service

Seeking purpose and meaning

Ex-servicewomen also stressed the importance of finding new purpose and meaning in civilian life, akin to their sense of fulfilment in the military.

"I really wanted to be part of something that was bigger than myself… I felt way better about that than I did about working for an insurance broker." - Victoria, Royal Air Force, aged 35, ≤5 years since leaving Service

However, most found that employment support for service leavers emphasised high-paying, fast-paced, male-dominated careers, which many of them did not desire. Instead, they sought careers that offered a balanced lifestyle.

"When I left, I knew that I didn't want a stressful second career… if I wanted to continue being stressed, I can do it in the Army… I do not want to go and be in any

kind of high-powered job where I am running at the same or more levels of stress." - Alice, Royal Air Force, aged 53, ≤5 years since leaving Service

After leaving the military, participants prioritised obtaining a meaningful second career as employment provided them with a sense of purpose which was integral to their feelings of success. For some, financial security provided by their military pension allowed them to prioritise joy and self-discovery in their career choices.

"I had my pension coming in, so the pressure was off on the level of work and the wage that I was going to get out here. I could take the time, I could find me, find out who I am and not just a military rank and a name like I had been for 28 years of my life. Found out who is [name]. So I took the time to do that." - Elizabeth, British Army, aged 48, ≤5 years since leaving Service

Ex-servicewomen with children also found purpose through the pursuit of positive family-wellbeing, often valuing the ability to balance both work and family life.

"I think the Army really did make you feel like you had to choose between your children or your job but then when you do come into the civilian…it really does let you have both of those worlds." - Eleanor, British Army, aged 42, 6–10 years since leaving Service

A clash of cultures in civilian life

For ex-servicewomen, adjusting to civilian life meant confronting differing workplace values and expectations. Many reported feeling overwhelmed, experiencing imposter syndrome, and working long hours to prove themselves.

"The first six months I thought my head was on fire and it was probably the worst decision I'd ever made… Completely overwhelming. Imposter syndrome… it took me a long time to accept that maybe people don't have the drive you do. It was just switching that mindset off and calming down." - Francis, British Army, aged 73, 11–20 years since leaving Service

This cultural clash was compounded by frustrations with civilian colleagues who seemed less dedicated, which contributed to feelings of dissatisfaction and frequent job changes.

> *"I've had a lot of frustrations working with civilians because their lack of ethics … They are there for the 9am to 5pm, they don't work a minute over… I found it very brutal when I first left." - Elizabeth, British Army, aged 48, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

Building friendships with civilians was also a challenge. Ex-servicewomen felt disconnected from their civilian peers and often found it difficult to relate to them.

> *"It is slightly harder making friends in civilian life than it is in the military. Not slightly harder; it is very hard. You don't just have that connection that you have in the military. But I probably started giving people a bit more time than I would have done when I first left and realised that actually I do quite like you and do want to forge a friendship." - Eleanor, British Army, aged 42, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

For ex-servicewomen, there remained a perception that women who had served in the Armed Forces were inherently different from most civilian women, which impacted ideas of belonging.

> *"I just thought to myself people aren't going to get me…. What have I possibly got in common with these people who have just done their 9am to 5pm for the last 25 years, gone home to their families." - Daphne, Royal Air Force, aged 53, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

Suitability of support services for ex-servicewomen

Some participants felt that support services provided during their transition, particularly those offered by the official resettlement service for the UK Armed Forces, the Career Transition Partnership (CTP) (Ministry of Defence, 2024), were inadequate. Many felt that courses and support did not address the unique challenges women faced, leading to feelings of discouragement.

> *"Most of these guys were like, oh yes I want a six-figure sum job in London… And she [CTP provider] said well I wouldn't be looking for any high-powered jobs really because with your age and being female you are unlikely to get hired for anything so what I suggest you do is maybe just partly retire and get a local job in your*

hospital working a few days a week… because she'd said that to me I thought oh yes maybe that's all I can do. Maybe that's all I capable of …. professionally I left the Service massively disillusioned that nobody would have me." - Jane, Royal Air Force, aged 57, ≤5 years since leaving Service

Some women found courses offered during their resettlement period poorly timed or inaccessible, especially those balancing caregiving responsibilities.

"I didn't do any resettlement because I went to one interview down at [base] and I had the youngest with me and this woman, she tried to talk to me about things and little one was crying… So in the end I just didn't do any resettlement." - Caroline, Royal Air Force, aged 46, 6–10 years since leaving Service

Ex-servicewomen reported a lack of mental health support post-service, which left some ill-equipped to cope with the consequences of their experiences in-service and the challenges of transitioning unless they actively sought support.

"My best friend that was in that unit, female, injured, she left in the June and she killed herself this year… She didn't get the help. I think that's the frightening part of it that I got the help." - Louise, British Army, aged 36, ≤5 years since leaving Service

Such perceptions were juxtaposed with the experiences of ex-servicewomen with senior roles who often received better support due to their rank, highlighting a potential disparity in access to help.

"I was a lieutenant colonel so when a lieutenant colonel puts their hand up and says help me people tend to do that… I was supported… I got the time to recover and I wasn't affected career-wise because of that." - Anne, British Army, aged 56, 6–10 years since leaving Service

Ex-servicewomen with experiences of military sexual trauma (MST) shared that perceptions of the availability of support were mixed, with some attributing their lack of support to their own attitudinal barriers which prevented them from seeking. However, others noted that both formal and informal support for MST was not readily available to them in a military environment.

> "*A lot of the time it was based on a judgement call or gently swept under the rug or people knew about it and didn't do anything about it… No one thought to come to me and be like are you alright.*" - Catherine, British Army, aged 35, ≤5 years since leaving Service

For ex-servicewomen who had left the Armed Forces prematurely due to parenting responsibilities, a lack of support for gendered concerns, such as balancing parenthood with military duties, and difficulties receiving support from management were significant barriers.

> *"If I hadn't had my daughter I know for a fact I would still be in the military now… I'd had the conversation with the then chief clerk at the unit I was with and said what are my options in terms of if I do decide to go [Afghanistan]. He says well have you not got anybody that can look after her etc. I said well my parents are elderly that's not an option. He said well have you looked at foster care. I thought I'm not going to put a baby in foster care just so I can go to Afghanistan." - Daphne, Royal Air Force, aged 53, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

Barriers to accessing veteran-specific support after leaving the Armed Forces stemmed from longstanding biases within Service, resulting in participants feeling deterred from seeking or receiving some support which may have been beneficial. The limited visibility of women in such services perpetuated the exclusion of women and instead mirrored the lack of belonging reported by women in Service.

> *"As a female veteran when you leave the Service I personally didn't feel part of anything to do with the military… Because of the experiences I'd had in the military whether or not it would be a boys club again." - Daphne, Royal Air Force, aged 53, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

However, some ex-servicewomen also shared that access was made difficult as they were often unaware of the specific support that was available and the varying needs that could be addressed.

"It was me digging to have to get those solutions. It wasn't really here's your support, here's what can get you through this because it was a lot at the time." - Sarah, Royal Air Force, aged 37, 6–10 years since leaving Service

Facilitators for a successful transition to civilian life

Ex-servicewomen described a number of factors and experiences they felt had facilitated their successful transition to civilian life; these were related to having overcome barriers experienced during their time in-service. Other facilitators included early preparation, autonomy and control, multi-faceted identities, the perceived ease of their transition and learning from the experiences of others.

Early preparation for transition

All participants reported that early preparation for life as a civilian enabled an easier transition to civilian life with most suggesting that preparations should begin early in their military career for all serving personnel. They agreed that practical preparations should be made as soon as possible which then allowed for an easier emotional transition.

"If somebody leaves it to the last two years that's not enough time. You should start resettlement in your last ten years. Not doing courses or anything but starting to prepare yourself to get out." - Mary, British Army, aged 55, ≤5 years since leaving Service

For most, decisions to leave the Armed Forces were not linear and many had considered their departure on numerous occasions. For those women, early preparation in the form of exploring potential career paths, identifying transferable skills, acquiring additional qualifications if needed mitigated the impact of transitioning to civilian employment.

"Start the education process earlier... Things like buy a house, start saving because it's going to make it so much easier for you to transition when you want to and every opportunity that the military gives you for a civilian qualification take it." - Abigail, British Army, aged 53, ≤5 years since leaving Service

Moreover, being proactive by making financial decisions such as purchasing properties allowed participants to foster a life outside of the military.

> *"Because I bought my own place I was kind of pretty much half civilian anyway." - Mary, British Army, aged 55, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

Conversations pertaining to the facilitating role of early planning and preparation allowed participants to reiterate the challenges they faced and the perceived benefits of having both the time and discussions to align their military skills and expertise with civilian career pathways to mitigate potential difficulties.

> *"I think that shocked me the realistic timeline of having to get a job like it's not a matter of weeks it could be three months. But no one had that conversation." - Louise, British Army, aged 36, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

As being adequately prepared was integral to perceptions of success and allowed for a smoother transition, participants noted that an anticipatory approach to leaving the Armed Forces allowed them to identify their own needs, which were primarily practical before focusing on the emotional aspects of transitioning. Thus, better support for achieving financial stability and sustainable employment enabled ex-servicewomen to address their personal wellbeing.

> *"A successful transition looks like being prepared for it. The military need to prepare these guys and girls that are leaving…The two things that are at the forefront of your mind is I've got to get a job and I've got to get a house if you didn't have a house already… But again all this careers transition partnership you are going to walk into a job. You are not… It's difficult for personnel who have left the military to sell themselves at interview because they're not used to doing that." - Daphne, Royal Air Force, aged 53, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

Multi-faceted identities of women

A factor which enabled participants to successfully transition to civilian life and integrate with minimal challenges was the ability of women to compartmentalise their time in the Armed Forces. During their time in the military, participants became adept at

occupying multiple social roles and as a result their military identity was not intrinsic to their sense of self.

> "*Being in the military, coming home and being a mum. It was like that for many a year*." - Elizabeth, British Army, aged 48, ≤5 years since leaving Service

For some, this recognition of the multiple social roles and identities of women was likened to playing a role which allowed women to cope with the challenges of life in the military.

> *"This is how I'm going to have to be if I want to be in the Navy, if I want to be part of the team kind of thing… I took on this persona that got me through the Navy. So transitioning was like taking that mask off again." - Elizabeth, British Army, aged 48, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

Participants separated the different aspects of their identity and experiences in the Armed Forces and viewed their time in-service as a job rather than a defining feature of their identity. These women were better able to engage with life as a civilian and navigate their new social and professional environments.

> *"For me it was just a job.. I don't brag about being a veteran or having spent time in the military or being the first woman to do whatever course it was I did or to have the medals that I wear. It's just who I am. It's just what I've done. It's not a big deal in my eyes." - Kate, British Army, aged 44, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

Participants felt that this form of compartmentalisation was a more prevalent coping strategy implemented by women than men. They emphasised the facilitating role of disengaging with military-specific environments, which helped promote a stronger sense of identity and emotional stability after leaving.

> *"[husband] hasn't left it [military] behind really and he's struggled now he's retired from the military to try and leave it behind and he's still looking for that military attachment whereas I've just dropped it like a stone. I don't want anything to do with it at all. I still refer back to it and I still laugh about it and I still*

am proud of what I've done but I've left it behind." - Anne, British Army, aged 56, 6–10 years since leaving Service

Similarly, by setting aside their experiences in the military, ex-servicewomen were able to report on distinct experiences that supported their transitioning such as the process of humanisation which came with leaving the structured military environment and fostered the development of a different identity outside of the Armed Forces.

"She [colleague] actually called me by my first name which I felt more human again because in the military she wouldn't have called me by my first name. So actually it was really lovely and I just felt normal for a change." - Alice, Royal Air Force, aged 53, ≤5 years since leaving Service

Informal support by friends and family played an important facilitating role in helping women cope with the challenges of leaving the military and enable an easier transition, assisting them when formal support was lacking.

"I have this wonderful network of friends that are all over the country and we've been friends since school. So they endured through the Service, they've endured since." - Victoria, Royal Air Force, aged 35, ≤5 years since leaving Service

Participating in physical activities, sports and other hobbies allowed ex-servicewomen to retain aspects of their identity when coping with challenges. By equating sports with their time in-service, they reflected on the compartmentalisation that allowed them to implement positive coping strategies that they had utilised in Service.

"I'm very proud of the fact that my answer is to go for a run and I can do that because I built up my first career in the military and taught me that 1) exercise keeps your brain and your body healthy but 2) that identity of having been in the military still stays with me. So it reminds me where I came from and that I'm, I joke when I say like a strong, capable woman but I am a strong, capable woman." - Catherine, British Army, aged 35, ≤5 years since leaving Service

Autonomy and control

Choice and control over decisions to leave the Armed Forces impacted the perceived ease at which women transitioned to civilian life as those who actively made the decision to leave the Armed Forces reported more positive emotions and fewer challenges.

> *"I feel in a completely different place mentally to what I did when I was in the RAF. Now I feel as though I can decide things for myself and that I am in full control of making me happy." - Jennifer, Royal Air Force, aged 44, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

Specifically, the ease of their transition and lack of challenges were directly related to the control they had over the decision to leave and the subsequent acceptance.

> *"I think maybe that's why I found my transition easier because I was ready to leave the services. Some people don't have a choice when they leave." - Elizabeth, British Army, aged 48, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

Again, participants drew on the experiences of both men and women who encountered more challenges and difficulties when leaving the Armed Forces was not an autonomous, informed decision.

> *"I've gone from saying it's [transition] forever, ongoing and I think there will always be bits that trip you up but mentally as soon as I left, I left but unlike my husband who did not leave on his own terms I left on my own terms. It was my choice." - Martha, British Army, aged 40, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

Acceptance of autonomy and choice in civilian life, however, was described as a process for ex-servicewomen who benefitted from support that allowed them to overcome the self-imposed barriers that participants had placed upon themselves after spending a prolonged period in an environment that was detrimental to their general wellbeing.

> *"Through talking, coaching I identified in myself it was this fear of commitment. If I did this job and didn't like it I would stick it for years and years like maybe I did the Army" - Rose, British Army, aged 57, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

The newly gained control and autonomy in civilian life was beneficial for participants, however, it required those who left under difficult circumstances to assess their new environments.

> *"Every aspect of my life was controlled and if I'm in the wrong environment and I'm controlled by a control freak I really have no control whatsoever over anything. So if you leave and then don't find the right space to be or an understanding space to be it can become... It was almost like being a child and having to learn at playgroup what is sharing and what is naughty and what is acceptable all over again as a 33-year-old woman." - Louise, British Army, aged 36, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

Resilience

As a result of the challenges and negative experiences that participants had shared as distinct barriers that they faced, many highlighted their inherent resilience which allowed them to face any difficulties when transitioning to civilian life. Often, this manifested in-service through the process of compartmentalisation which continued to assist participants after leaving.

> *"Being a member of the military as a female has made me stronger. And to stand my corner and to speak out. Of which I'm not adverse to doing. And to challenge. I challenge all the time. So actually that transition for me has only been made easier because of my time as a female in the military where I've had to stand my ground." - Daphne, Royal Air Force, aged 53, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

In the absence of formal support for gendered experiences in Service such as MST, participants shared that their resilience was developed through these experiences and enabled them to support other women.

> *"I got no support in any shape or form. But that's what life is all about is being resilient when dreadful things happen. And to make sure they don't happen to other people - that was the guiding thing in all of this that I would make sure that it could never be dealt with in the way that I was." - Francis, British Army, aged 73, 11–20 years since leaving Service*

Thus, resilience, during the interviews, was characterised as a gendered trait inherent to being a woman in the military. Participants repeated the view that their resilience stemming from time in-service allowed them to cope with the potential challenges when leaving the Armed Forces and transitioning to civilian life.

> *"Females would most likely cope with the transition better than men; I think mentally we tend to be a bit more resilient." - Elizabeth, British Army, aged 48, ≤5 years since leaving Service*

During the discussions, participants shared that men on the other hand, may struggle with the transition more than women.

> *"A lot of them will struggle with it and do struggle. My partner does. He tried it for a year, honestly, I thought he was going to kill somebody, so he's gone, I mean he's in Ukraine at the minute. So he would rather be in that environment than face the reality of transitioning back into civvy street because he can't do it." - Daphne, Royal Air Force, aged 53, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

However, the concept of resilience and related traits could be maladaptive in some circumstances and instead women could suppress any emotional difficulties. This was identified as learnt behaviour from their time in Service.

> *"I probably deal with it very badly and in a very military way I just suck it up… I literally I'll get to crisis point, I'll have a melt down and that's usually when my husband finds out about it and then I come off the peak and it all levels off again and I go it's fine and I ignore it." - Martha, British Army, aged 40, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

Learning through shared experience

As ex-servicewomen benefitted from learning from the experiences of other ex-service personnel, they noted that sharing experiences and understanding the challenges that they might face allowed them to transition much more easily. Some ex-servicewomen drew on the experiences of their partners who transitioned to civilian life.

> *"I was really fortunate that my husband had gone before… because he'd been through it I was able to leverage his advice and guidance and he was able to mentor and coach me in terms of what the assessment centres were looking for." - Martha, British Army, aged 40, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

Other participants shared the way in which talking to other ex-servicewomen would assist their transition and provide a useful form of support.

> *"It's not until you have someone who has actually done it and gone through the different experiences… until you've spoken to someone who has actually done it that will then give you - the person the confidence… Particularly women are normally Army wise I would say more resilient but they still come across difficulties" - Francis, British Army, aged 73, 11–20 years since leaving Service*

Participants were also proactive in creating a community of support or implementing their own specific networks where this was lacking. By learning from the experiences of other ex-serving personnel and sharing their own challenges and facilitators to enable better transitions for others, participants were also able to promote their own psychological wellbeing.

> *"There was quite an extensive military presence and a lot of military history here in surrounding my village. Because there was nothing for us I decided to start a Facebook page for veterans. So I started a Facebook page. I also started a feel good page called [name] and I just put up some inspirational, happy memes. And I just try and give people something to smile about." - Kate, British Army, aged 44, 6–10 years since leaving Service*

Learning from appropriate support services, even where that support was provided by civilians, allowed participants to navigate the challenges they faced during their transition.

> *"The girl that we spoke to on SSAFA [Armed Forces charity] because she broke it all down and I think in my head I knew that she was a civvy and she volunteered so she could literally just break it down. And sometimes it was a relief to be able to talk to someone and just be like this is going on how do I deal with this. It was*

having I think the point of contact of just someone on the outside just saying it's OK you can do this or whatever. I think that is probably what got me through massively." - Sarah, Royal Air Force, aged 37, 6–10 years since leaving Service

Discussion:

This qualitative study aimed to examine the barriers and facilitators that influenced a successful transition to civilian life for ex-servicewomen, focusing on the strategies employed to navigate perceived stressful experiences. Ten core themes emerged, reflecting both barriers and facilitators encountered during the transition process, which were often shaped by in-service experiences and the subtle marginalisation of women within the military through exclusionary practices, as well as the perceived absence of relevant transition support. Our findings also showed that ex-servicewomen's perspectives of a successful transition were directly related to their emotional wellbeing and attaining joy and balance in their post-service life.

While the transition from military to civilian life presents complex challenges for all Service leavers, these findings underscore that ex-servicewomen faced difficulties distinct from those experienced by their male counterparts (Croak et al., 2025; Godier-McBard, 2021; Smith et al., 2025). While certain aspects of the transition, such as the clash of cultures in civilian employment (Shue et al., 2021), needing autonomy (Reid & Sims, 2024), and barriers to accessing support services (Jones et al., 2019), are common to both genders, there were notable gendered aspects that differentiated ex-servicewomen's experiences. For instance, a clash of cultures while navigating imposter syndrome, needing autonomy and control over decisions to leave when leaving due to MST or parenting responsibilities, and gender-specific barriers that deterred women from accessing support services that were perceived to be designed for and with men.

The study's findings align with existing literature, which suggests that women in the military experience distinct and additional challenges, such as MST, caregiving responsibilities, and navigating a traditionally masculine environment, challenges that are often more pronounced for women than for men (Baumann et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2025; Williamson et al., 2023). Nevertheless, many ex-servicewomen developed

adaptive coping strategies during their Service, including compartmentalisation, mirroring behaviour, and resilience, which facilitated their transition to civilian life. Notably, the lack of a sense of belonging, as indicated by our participants and corroborated by previous studies (Godier-McBard, Gillin, et al., 2022; Jones & Hanley, 2017), impeded the acceptance of a military identity. For many women, military service was not integral to their sense of self, a factor that subsequently aided their transition to civilian life.

As noted, our study revealed a more nuanced understanding of the gendered experiences of women. For example, despite the availability of tailored employment programs, many women reported difficulties in securing stable, fulfilling employment that matched their skills and aspirations. Instead, they often found themselves employed in male-dominated industries, where corporate values did not align with their personal desire to engage in roles that allowed them to help others. Moreover, recent statistics from the Career Transition Partnership (Ministry of Defence, 2024) indicated that ex-servicewomen faced higher unemployment and economic inactivity rates compared to their male counterparts. These findings point to the existence of gendered challenges in the civilian job market, shaped by gender biases that limit the career prospects of women and hinder their transition. However, it is important to note that economic inactivity may partly be due to societal expectations of women to be the primary caregiver for children and older relatives, and that some may not want to work as shared by our participants. Such insights are crucial for developing targeted employment support that recognises and addresses the unique contributions of ex-servicewomen to both military service and civilian careers and better aligns with their values and interests.

Our findings further showed that women placed great emphasis on the emotional aspects of transitioning to civilian life and argued that many services were ill-equipped to provide the holistic support that they require when faced with potential emotional difficulties. Such findings indicated that women and indeed all serving personnel may benefit from interventions or support prior to leaving, which facilitates psychological preparedness when transitioning to foster the emotional stability needed to cope with other challenges.

Finally, our findings revealed that many ex-servicewomen employed coping strategies such as perfectionism, emotional suppression, and overachievement, which had lasting effects on their well-being beyond their military service. These patterns align with research on women in other uniformed services, such as the police, indicating that women often adopt distinct coping mechanisms (Schafer et al., 2024) to navigate exclusionary working environments. Our results reinforce the argument for a cultural overhaul within military and uniformed services to create a more inclusive environment for women.

As noted in international research on the experiences of ex-servicewomen, our findings highlighted specific barriers faced by women that often stemmed from their time in Service (Boros & Erolin, 2021; Eichler, 2016; Eichler, 2021). A key overarching finding was that facilitators of successful transition were largely behavioural and psychosocial, including processes of resilience, identity fragmentation and early preparation, while barriers were both cultural and structural, stemming from gendered treatment in Service and inadequate support systems. The layered experience of being both ex-serving personnel and a woman created a unique amalgamation of challenges, furthering our understanding of ex-servicewomen's specific experiences and needs during military-to-civilian transition. Support provided to women leaving the military should therefore adopt a more tailored approach that recognises and builds upon the psychosocial strengths that facilitate their transition (Croak et al., 2025).

Strengths and limitations:

This qualitative study recruited ex-servicewomen who were participating in the KCMHR Health and Wellbeing Cohort study as well as ex-servicewomen who had directly contacted the research team. As a result, the sample consisted of women who were somewhat active in supporting research with the Armed Forces community and may not be representative of all ex-servicewomen. However, a core strength of recruiting from a pre-existing sample was that participants' Armed Forces service history had been established, and existing information about their Service characteristics enabled purposive sampling to achieve representation across Service branches.

Similarly, our sample largely consisted of older women who had served in the Armed Forces for some time, and were often senior in rank when leaving. It is important to consider that the barriers and facilitators may be qualitatively different for women of lower ranks who served and those who served for a shorter length of time. Furthermore, ethnicity data collected during this research showed that all participants were of a White background. Future research should consider the role of ethnicity and other intersectional differences, including relationship status and age on experiences of transitioning to civilian life as well as the needs of women who leave after a short length of Service.

Conclusions:

Our findings showed that while UK ex-servicewomen share some similarities with their male counterparts in respect of the barriers and facilitators of a successful transition, they may also experience distinct gendered challenges during, and after, military service which affect the likelihood of a successful transition. The findings presented in this study suggest that the Armed Forces, and organisations responsible for veterans, should do more to address the specific needs of military women by tackling the inequality encountered by women in the military and ensuring that women are able to access suitable support and guidance after leaving. By specifically examining the experiences of ex-servicewomen, more inclusive and effective policy frameworks can be developed, ensuring that support services are responsive to the needs of all ex-serving personnel regardless of gender.

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Figure legends

Fig. 1 Country and previous Service branch of participants. Distribution of participants according to country of residence and branch of the UK Armed Forces in which they previously served.

Ethics declaration

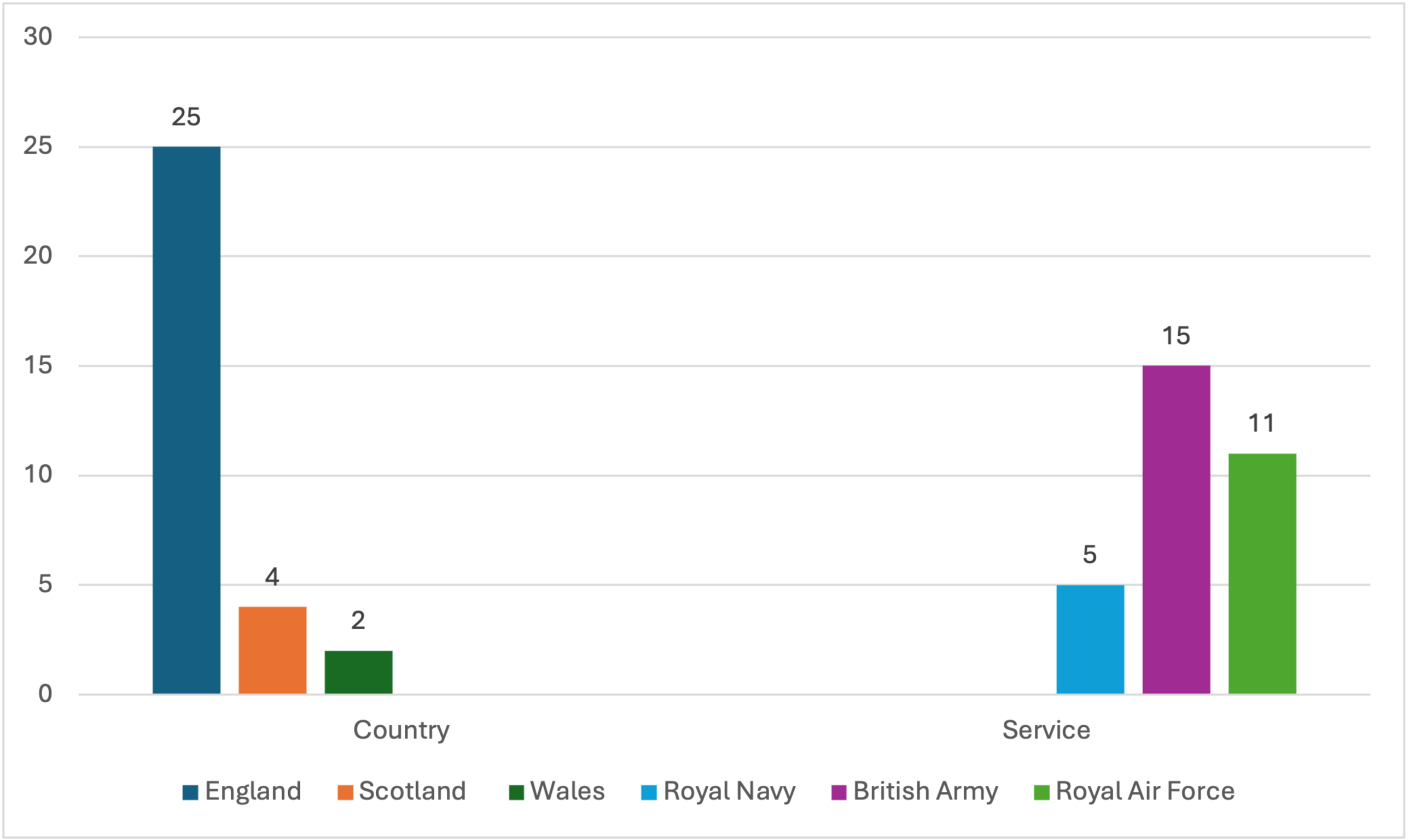
Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Health Faculties Research Ethics Subcommittee at King's College London (reference: HR/DP-22/23-33303). All methods were carried out in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and the relevant research ethics guidelines and regulations of King's College London. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation.

Data availability

The qualitative data generated and analysed during this study comprise semi-structured interview transcripts from 31 ex-servicewomen who previously served in the UK Armed Forces. These data are not publicly available due to their sensitive and potentially identifiable nature. Although transcripts were pseudonymised prior to analysis, the detailed personal narratives and contextual information contained within participants'

accounts present a potential risk of deductive identification. Unrestricted sharing of these data could therefore compromise participant confidentiality.

Requests for access to additional research materials may be directed to the corresponding author and will be considered on a case-by-case basis, subject to participant confidentiality, ethical approval and institutional data governance requirements.


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