

“I FEEL ABORTION IS STILL A TABOO SUBJECT TO TALK ABOUT”

ABORTION IN THE UK ARMED FORCES: A CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY

AUTHORS

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INTRODUCTION

Abortion is a common pregnancy outcome; in the United Kingdom (UK) 1 in 3 women will have an abortion by the age of 45.

Women make up 11.7% (16,220) of the UK Armed Forces (AF), and despite this there have been reports of their gender-specific health needs not being addressed by the UKAF. There is a worldwide absence of literature and policy on abortion-care in the AF, including rates and experiences.

OBJECTIVE

To address the paucity of data on abortion experiences in UK servicewomen, and provide a basis for future research and support for servicewomen.

METHODOLOGY

A REDCap survey was circulated amongst UK servicewomen via social media networks, and snowball distribution was used to widen participation.

Quantitative data was used for descriptive statistics and qualitative data was analysed iteratively by the authors, with regular meetings to agree on themes.

AFFILIATIONS

Academic Department of Military General Practice.

All authors are employed by the United Kingdom (UK) Ministry of Defence (MoD) in a healthcare role.



CONCLUSION

This is the first study to collect data on UK Servicewomen's experience around abortion-care, and highlights a complex interplay of factors which may influence abortion-care decisions. Stigma and judgement were pervasive threads running through all themes, negatively impacting UKAF women. Evidence-based policies and information on abortion are recommended for both servicepeople and healthcare professionals to facilitate access to abortion and begin to destigmatise it in the AF.

RESULTS

427 servicewomen responded: **29%** declared they previously had an abortion, with **79%** of those being during military service and **11%** required whilst on deployment.

4 key themes emerged from the qualitative analysis, and are highlighted with an illustrative quote.

1. LIFE IN THE MILITARY

"HAVING A MEDICAL ABORTION IN...COMMUNAL BATHROOMS...NOT IDEAL"

2. TRUST IN INFORMATION HOLDERS

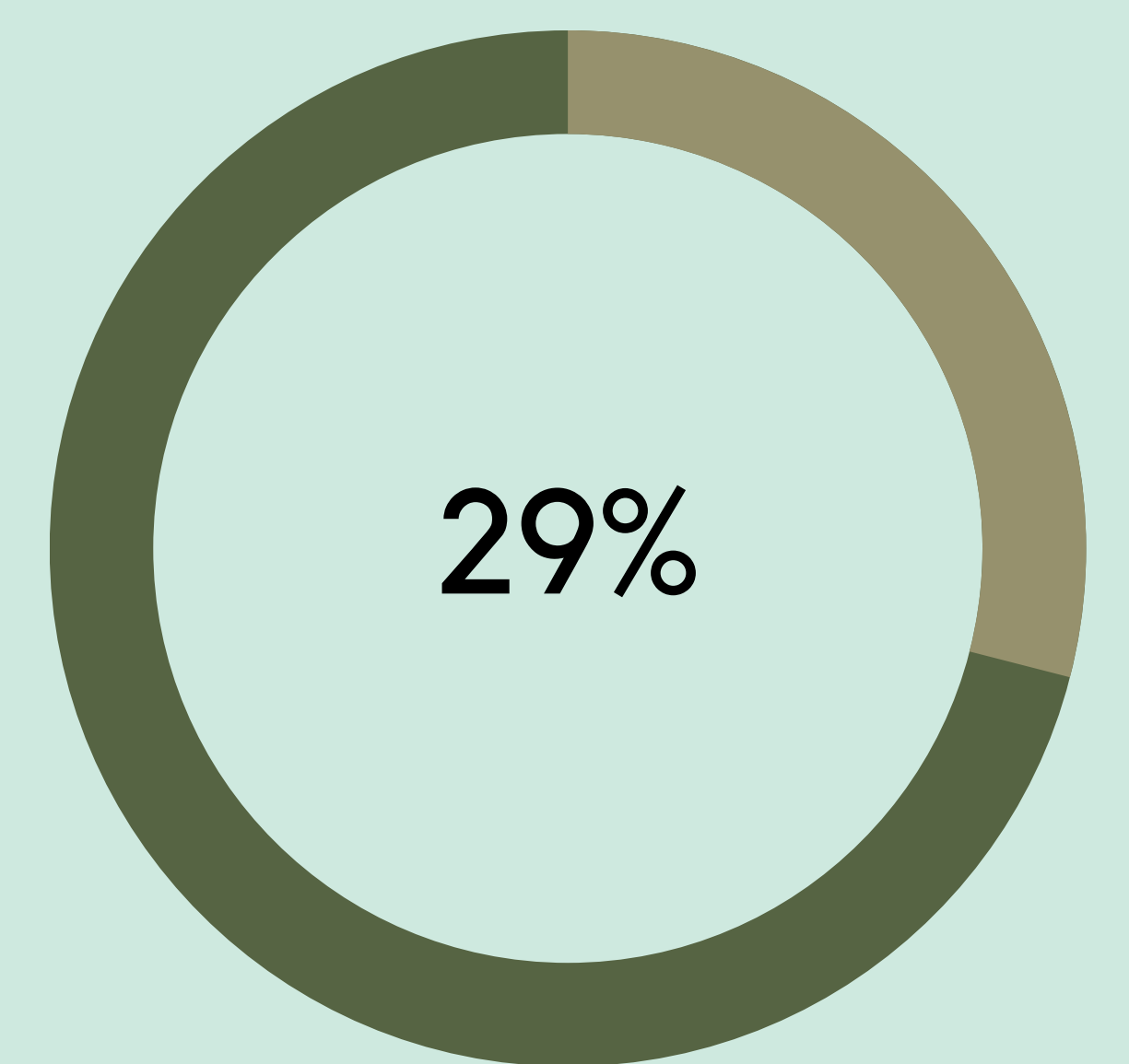
"I WOULDN'T FEEL COMFORTABLE...TALKING TO MY CHAIN OF COMMAND OR MEDICAL CENTRE ABOUT ABORTION"

3. INFLUENCES, BARRIERS AND ACCESS

"[I] CHOSE TO DISCHARGE MYSELF EARLY IN ORDER TO MAKE A MILITARY COURSE...PASSED THE REMAINING ABORTION IN A PORTACABIN"

4. SYSTEMIC LACK OF AWARENESS

"PREGNANCY/MATERNITY ETC IS COVERED IN A REALLY DETAILED WAY IN POLICY, BUT FINDING POLICY ON ABORTION IS NIGH ON IMPOSSIBLE"



29% of respondents declared they previously had an abortion



Of these respondents, **54%** involved their military medical centre in their care.

KEY MESSAGES

- More information on abortion for service-personnel is needed.
- Updated policy for chain of command and defence healthcare professionals is required.
- Many of the findings align with civilian UK literature but with the added barriers of needing to involve their employer and managing in a male dominated environment.
- Similar barriers may be found in other uniformed or male dominated environments or those with occupational health considerations such as the Police or the aviation industry. However due to lack of evidence, future research in these areas could be considered.