



# LGB Female Veterans' Experience of Military Service During the "Gay Ban": A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

**Introduction** Until 2000, the UK Armed Forces implemented a "gay ban" that led to the investigation and discharge of thousands of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) veterans. Yet, the experiences of those who served during the ban remain unknown. According to the minority stress model, individuals may face specific stressors related to both their gender and sexual minority status. Thus, the present study investigated the military experiences of female veterans who identify as LGB and who served during the ban.

**Methods** Female LGB veterans ( $N = 10$ ) were recruited from a larger cohort of female veterans who previously took part in a survey with a UK national veteran mental health charity. Participants were interviewed online using MS Teams between March and May 2022. A semi-structured interview method was employed to explore participants' experiences of being LGB within the military as well as perceived differential treatment. Thematic qualitative analysis was used to identify key themes.

**Results** Three overarching and seven subthemes were identified, reflecting the *risk of being found out*, *the experience of negative treatment*, and *possible buffering factors*.

**Conclusions** Female LGB veterans who served under the "gay ban" faced negative experiences, including fear and distress, sexism, and interpersonal and institutional discrimination related to their (perceived) sexual orientation. In addition to experiencing negative treatment during service similar to non-LGB female veterans, LGB female veterans may face an elevated risk of being targeted and additionally experience sexual orientation discrimination. Findings of the current study are in line with the minority stress model.

**Policy Implications** The current findings correspond with US evidence of ongoing negative treatment of LGB serving personnel. Together, this should encourage further investigation of ongoing negative treatment of LGB females within the UK Armed Forces, adaptations of veteran services to address unmet needs of female LGB veterans, and appropriate training to combat negative differential treatment of LGB female serving personnel.

**Keywords** Sexual minority · Veterans · LGB female veterans · Discrimination · Sexism · Minority stress model

Within the UK, a "gay ban" was enforced by the Armed Forces (AF) and Ministry of Defence (MoD) that lasted until January 2000 (Herek, 1993). During this time, the Special Investigations Branch (SIB) was tasked with "hunting down" those "suspected, rumored, or outed as being gay" (Paige et al., 2021). Such persons were persecuted, bullied, imprisoned, and stripped of their awards and commissions (MoD, 2022). Their pensions were disregarded, and they were left

unsupported at discharge. Having specified no differentiation between gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation, the ban led to the investigation and dismissal of thousands of gender and sexual minority service personnel covertly serving. The proportion of LGB persons who served prior to the repeal of the ban remains unknown. In a recent study, 25% of an older sample of UK female veterans identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) (Hendriks et al., 2021a, b). While the MoD has made recent attempts to make amends via public apologies and returning of medals stripped (Bunkall, 2020; MoD, 2021), the lived experiences and potential enduring impact of the ban remains unknown.

Furthermore, there remains a notable paucity of research on the experiences and needs of UK female veterans. Existing

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veteran research has focused almost exclusively on male veterans (Dodds & Kiernan, 2019; Paige et al., 2021). However, empirical attention to female veterans has increased in recent years, likely due to the increasing proportion of female serving personnel (NATO, 2015). Some evidence suggests that UK female veterans and servicewomen experience similar or greater rates of common mental disorders than their male counterparts (Godier-McBard et al., 2021). Still, female veterans may be less likely to seek support from veteran services and may experience less satisfaction with services if they do engage (Goldzweig et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2006). Other studies have highlighted high rates of psychological difficulties among female veterans and have drawn attention to adverse experiences UK female veterans faced during military service (e.g., Hendriks et al., 2021b; Maguen et al., 2012; Turchik & Wilson, 2010). Female service personnel are a gender minority in the UK Armed Forces, and such findings hold important weight in consideration of the *minority stress model*, which posits that individuals belonging to a minority group (e.g., gender and sexual orientation) encounter specific chronic stressors relating to their minority status that in turn have negative consequences on their physical and mental health (Meyer, 2003). Within the military context, stereotypically masculine values have historically been valued and celebrated (Godfrey et al., 2012), and the resulting embedded (i.e., militarized) masculinity has led to the stereotyping of female personnel and seeming discrimination in career progression (Asch et al., 2012).

According to the minority stress model, unique stressors that a minority group face pressurize individuals to adapt to the environment (Dohrenwend et al., 1992; Meyer, 2003). This suggests that female veterans who identify as belonging to a sexual minority (SM) group are likely to face both unique gender and SM-related stressors during their military careers. In line with this, previous research among (non-veteran) SM groups has highlighted that (female) gender discrimination may drive mental health difficulties in its own right (Bostwick et al., 2014). As such, it is likely to expect that service personnel who are both female and LGB may face a unique set of experiences and stressors that represent differing elevated risks of adverse experiences and psychological outcomes. Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, there remains even less research exploring the experiences and outcomes of UK female LGB veterans.

Findings from American veteran studies may provide some insight into the challenges faced by UK female LGB veterans, though generalization should be made with caution. Throughout the twentieth century up until 2011, the US military operated a “Don’t ask, Don’t tell” policy that heavily discouraged the disclosure of sexual orientation (Goldbach & Castro, 2016). Despite the repeal of the policy, many US servicemembers continue to report discomfort with disclosing their sexuality (Biddix et al., 2013; McNamara et al., 2021b). Studies have highlighted that LGBT+ veterans report having

experienced interpersonal and institutional discrimination during service as well as abuse from fellow service members and health care providers (Livingston et al., 2019), which holds important health and wellbeing implications (Cochran et al., 2013). Findings also highlight a risk of common mental health difficulties, substance misuse, and PTSD (Cochran et al., 2013), as well as adverse experiences such as sexual harassment and assault (Lehavot & Simpson, 2014; Schuyler et al., 2020). The impact of such experiences may be further complicated by non-military experiences, as some data suggests that LGB veterans may be more likely than heterosexual veterans to experience childhood abuse as well as sexual and physical assault during adulthood (Blosnich et al., 2022). Such findings raise the question of whether experiences of UK female LGB veterans are similar.

## The Current Study

The field of female LGB veteran research in the UK is in its infancy. However, research among US veterans and other SM groups highlights the importance of developing an empirical understanding of the lived experiences of this population. Such an understanding could highlight relevant needs and ensure the availability of appropriate support where necessary. As such, this qualitative investigation is aimed at understanding the experiences of military service among LGB female veterans. While not an explicit aim to explore the experiences of those who served under “the ban,” the sample of the current study consisted of older veterans who had all served when the ban was still in place.

## Methods

The present study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (HR/DP-21/22–23,236). All participants provided informed consent to participate.

## Participants

A convenience sample of 120 UK female veterans identifying as LGBT+ was extracted from a wider sample who had taken part in survey investigating the needs of UK female veterans (Hendriks et al., 2021a, b). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (i) self-identifying as LGBT+, (ii) not meeting PTSD criteria on the PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5; Weathers et al., 2013) (i.e., having a score of less than 34; Murphy et al., 2017), and (iii) having provided consent to be contacted for further research. The study purposely selected individuals not meeting PTSD criteria to minimize the risk of eliciting high distress when talking about past (potentially traumatic) experiences during service.

The samples of 120 potential participants were allocated a random number and were contacted in batches of five (1–5, 5–10, etc.) until a sample of 10 was reached. A total of 55 participants were contacted (a total of 3 times) and invited to take part in the study, via an email that included the study information sheet. Two participants had invalid emails, two were no longer eligible (not living in the UK), and five did not consent to take part. Interested participants were asked to email the interviewer (LJH) to express interest and were then contacted via telephone to discuss the study further and arrange an interview date. All participants were made aware that participation was voluntary and would not be compensated. Participants provided written consent prior to taking part in the interview.

A total of 10 female veterans ( $M_{age} = 62.3$ ,  $SD_{age} = 5.56$ ) who self-identify as lesbian ( $n = 4$ ), gay ( $n = 5$ ), and bisexual ( $n = 1$ ) were interviewed. All participants reported disclosing their sexual orientation during service for the first time. Participant sociodemographic and military characteristics are described in Table 1.

### Semi-structured Interview

Interviews were carried out by LJH via MS Teams between March and May 2022, where they were recorded and transcribed. They lasted 60 min and 15s, on average. The interview began with a discussion of the rationale, participants providing verbal consent (recorded), and collecting demographic information. Participant sexual orientation was identified using an open question (“What is your sexual orientation?”), and their preferred terminology was used throughout the interview.

A semi-structured interview schedule (see Supplementary material) was developed to guide the discussion and elicit similar information across participants to allow for themes to evolve. The schedule drew on areas relevant to the experience of LGB females in the AF, including background in the AF, (positive and negative) experiences associated with being LGB in the military, and differential treatment within the military. Interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to report their subjective experience. Questions were developed based on a literature review. For example, the question “*Did you experience sexual harassment during your military service?*” was informed by research that identified that LGB identity was a significant predictor of sexual harassment during service (Schuyler et al., 2020). The question “*Did you have any negative experiences as a result of being LGB?*” was informed by previous research suggesting stigma around identifying as a sexual minority in the military (Mark et al., 2019). The remainder of the interview was unstructured as shown in the interview schedule where bullet points below each “parent” question indicate possible follow up questions for each section depending on the participant’s answers.

**Table 1** Participant sociodemographic and military characteristics ( $N = 10$ )

Sociodemographic and military characteristic	<i>N</i>
Age, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	62.3 (5.56)
Education	5
Low	5
High	
Living area	8
Rural	2
Urban	
Employment	3
Working	7
Retired	
Relationship status	7
In a relationship	3
Not in a relationship	
Sexuality	9
Lesbian or gay	1
Bisexual	
Rank	4
Officer	6
Other	
Role	4
Combat/combat support	6
Non-combat	
Reason for leaving	7
Voluntary	3
Non-voluntary	
Service length, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	18.0 (12.4)
Years since leaving service, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	25.6 (16.3)

Following the interview, participants were emailed thanking them for their participation and sharing a signposting booklet of psychosocial resources. Any potentially identifiable participant information was removed from interview transcripts before being shared with the research team, and all anonymized transcripts were checked for verbatim accuracy with the recorded interview. Video recordings were destroyed following transcription.

### Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted with the aim to richly describe patterns of meaning across the data, which was facilitated by using QDA Miner Lite v2.0.9 (2016). Using the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013), transcripts were repeatedly read, preliminary codes were generated, and candidate themes were developed, reviewed, and refined. A reflexive rather than a coding reliability approach was utilized (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Authors LJH and NB independently read and re-read all transcripts, identified potentially meaningful content and preliminary codes, and developed candidate themes. As many codes as needed were applied to each section of data, with each data

item attended to equally. The researchers then reviewed and refined candidate themes together, which were mapped according to potential links and hierarchies among them. The analysis included peer debriefing with co-authors to help establish credibility and trustworthiness of the results (Morrow, 2005).

## Results

Three overarching themes were identified, which reflected (i) the risk of being “found out,” (ii) the experience of negative treatment, and (iii) possible buffering factors. Themes and anonymized corresponding excerpts are outlined in Table 2, which provides a more detailed example quote for each theme.

### Risk of Being “Found Out”

One of the key themes identified were consequences associated with the risk of being “found out” as LGB while serving under the ban, which all participants spoke about. The first subtheme related to associated emotional consequences, such as persistent threat, feelings of unease, and loneliness, while the second subtheme related more to associated tangible consequences such as hindered career options, self-protective behaviors, and self-isolation.

#### Emotional Consequences Associated with the Risk of Being “Found Out”

All participants described fear related to the risk of being “found out” and needing to conceal their sexual orientation, which primarily related to the fear of being investigated. For example, “*You just knew you have to be careful around [peers]. And not confirm anything. And just because they would maybe go and report you that you were gay and then that would start an investigation. And so, you just have to be careful of what you said, what you did*” [participant 3]. Participants described being hypervigilant and constantly on guard, which contributed to a sense of loneliness: “*It’s crazy because you had to live with it. Cloak and dagger. You couldn’t talk to anybody about it, you know?*” [participant 1]. Another participant commented: “*that was a big negative, if you ever got caught, you know? Umm, but I think I was just very lucky. But you know, you just had to look over your shoulder constantly and had to be careful.*” [participant 3].

Participants also described resulting loneliness related to the risk of being “found out,” including a sense of being distressed about having to be selective in who they socialized with and who they trusted among their AF colleagues

“*because they would maybe go and report you that you were gay*” [participant 3]. Participants also described loneliness resulting from having to conceal their sexual orientation, such as “*it would have been nice to have had a friend that you could trust that you could reveal your sexual identity to*” [participant 4].

Some participants even reported breaches of confidence where their trust was betrayed by individuals who knew of their sexual orientation, which led to disruptions of their support network within the military (e.g., ostracization by others). Notably, one participant also described the impact of hiding their sexuality on their external social support systems, for example, such as facing challenges when their partner did not know when they were injured on deployment.

Finally, some participants reported an enduring effect of these consequences in terms of an ongoing sense of being guarded and (unconsciously) feeling as though they have to hide their sexual orientation, years after the ban lifted and having left the military: “*I still feel self-conscious, even though I’m in my 50’s. I’m married. I still feel self-conscious holding hands with my wife... because I think you spent so many years of being afraid.*” [participant 5].

#### Tangible Consequences Associated with the Risk of Being Found Out

Many participants reported practical, career-related consequences related to the risk of being “found out.” Participants reported a substantial risk that they could lose their job if they did not hide their sexual orientation and were “found out.” For example, “*when the [Officer Commanding] OC asked the question [if she was LGB]. And so I was like, bloody hell. You know, I can’t believe this, but I denied it. The fear of losing my job. Yeah. And a lot of people, a lot of women did lose their jobs.*” [participant 1]. They also reported that the risk of being “found out” hindered their careers in that they were ordered to unfavorable postings or because they had to pass up promotions requiring positive vetting: “*And you have to be positive vetted for the role that I was doing, and that really caused me a problem because I don’t like to tell fibs. Although you lived a different life like we did in the forces because of... the rules that there were, I think, to sit in an interview...because they’d ask you about your sexuality and you just think, ‘oh well, this’ll all catch up with me’ and you don’t wanna end up being court martialled and losing everything. So I just thought I’ll go on my own terms.*” [participant 2].

Other tangible consequences related to the risk of being “found out” were self-protective behavior changes, which included isolating themselves from others and trying to behave “*as a straight woman*” [participant 4]. Participants described having to actively change their behaviors to avoid

**Table 2** Themes and subthemes identified in the thematic analysis

Themes	Subthemes	Verbatim quotes	Participant
Risk of being found out	Emotional consequences associated with the risk of being found out	<p>“You just have to lie, which is quite a hard concept within the military, I think because we’re taught not to, you know, we’ve got integrity and that’s sort of built into us. You were constantly looking over your shoulder, suspicious of everybody, in case someone grasses you up or anything like that, and you used to look after your own.”</p> <p>“Umm I think it was the environment I was working in. It was very male dominated, lots of testosterone flying about and I wasn’t really sure and that I trusted them. You know, I couldn’t trust them with my umm. Suppose it was a secret. I didn’t trust them to keep their mouth shut. You know, there I didn’t trust their confidence at all.”</p>	Participant 3 Participant 1
	Practical consequences associated with the risk of being found out	<p>“It was so bad that you couldn’t even though that you suspected that colleagues were gay. You you could never quite trust your, your friends and your colleagues to come out to them because they could, they could have, you know, they could easily have turned you in and called in the the military investigators.”</p> <p>“After that happened [being questioned following name appearing on list turned into SIB], I became very protective of of what was around me and and who I was mixing with. I kind of kept myself to myself for a year.”</p> <p>“And obviously I only had ten years and some people had had 20 years plus some, of hiding your sexuality, always looking over your shoulder, double thinking. You can’t hold hands in public, you can’t... always thinking that there’s, you know there’s going to be a military police, SIB in that club. So you don’t go in. Yeah. So yeah, I think it definitely did affect our mental health.”</p>	Participant 4 Participant 1 Participant 5
Negative treatment during service	Sexual orientation discrimination	<p>“It’s always these derogatory comments and Oh well, you know what? She’s and a dike or She’s a I mean, you know, awful comments, really. You know, they’ve never used word lesbian oh she’s a dike She’s uh. You know, whatever. All their different horrible terminologies that soldiers and officers used.”</p> <p>“We were always accused [“by corporals and lance corporals, but it was mainly males that would do it”] cause we were all hanging out together. Even, even the straight girls would hang out together, and they wouldn’t get accused of being gay or anything like that. The blokes would all hang out together and they won’t be getting accused of being gay. But as soon as the gay or lesbians sort of hang out together, oh yeah, you’re all gay. You know what, what’s difference between us and them? We were just maybe we’re a bit more boisterous, or we drank more, or I don’t know. We just didn’t dress up and put those of makeup on or anything like that, or we just won’t flirt with the blokes. I don’t know.”</p> <p>“I’m still offended by the fact that as a young officer, I was asked to go and do what they call a block raid. And the block raid was basically an all-female block where we were asked to, at like 1:00 o’clock in the morning, use the key, pass, to um to open doors in bedrooms to try and catch women sleeping together... And that was that was common practice where there were lots of women serving together.”</p>	Participant 4 Participant 3 Participant 5
	Sexism	<p>“The misogyny was probably harder to deal with. More than the sexual harassment, it was more the microaggressions and the passive aggressive and the you know a man—the typical thing that happens in a male environment where you’re in a meeting and you have an idea and a male colleague will repeat that idea you know, a minute later and the male will say oh that’s a brilliant idea. You feel like, really, you know you can see exactly what, you’re being mansplained”</p> <p>“Certainly there was discrimination against the women when we came into the [Royal Army Physical Training] PT corps, absolutely, and I don’t doubt for one minute that is still going on. Well. You know the guys would talk the talk, walk the walk. But we had to break through that glass ceiling, you know. We had to be 10 times better than the best boy if you like, the best bloke, uh, which I found thoroughly frustrating. Certainly when I was waiting to get promoted, umm, not waiting to get promoted but striving for promotion.”</p>	Participant 5 Participant 1

Table 2 (continued)

Themes	Subthemes	Verbatim quotes	Participant
	Sexual harassment	<p>“Yeah, a lot of a lot of, um, sexual harassment. Umm, in particular when I was in Germany, I was sexually harassed by senior, quite a senior officer, so when I was a young officer, who basically said, you know, if you want the career, sleep with me. I threw my drink over him in a bar and complained to one of his staff officers and apparently it was a regular thing that he did.”</p> <p>“When I was a Staff Sergeant, we had a regimental dinner night and the RSM decided at 3:00 o'clock in the morning to come in my room and make advances at me. And when I told him where to go, umm he politely told me that if I reported him, he would report me. And whilst he could deny it, I'd be thrown out. Umm. So you're then left in a situation where you have been really quite badly wronged, but you can't do anything about it.”</p>	Participant 5 Participant 10
Enjoyment and social support: possible buffering factors	Service enjoyment	<p>“Having the opportunity to, literally people would get off the bus from the train station and they were, you know, teenage kids just left school coming to join the army, you know.. long hair, trainers and scruffs. And you know, however many weeks later we were sending them out the other end with their parents coming and seeing a massive, massive difference in them. And teaching them all the values of you know, not just the skillset they needed to be soldiers, but also you know, discipline. They were smart. They were marching. We were on parade, they were respectful. They had learned new skills. They were looking forward to a career—that was very, very rewarding.”</p> <p>“You you have a sense of identity and a sense of accomplishment. You know, every time you promote or every time you get a new qualification. Um, you are you are immediately rewarded either by an increased rank or an increase in pay, or a better job. And so you you have that feel good about you. Um, so professionally it's it's a lovely place if you're the round peg in the round hole, it's the, it's a really good place to work.”</p>	Participant 5 Participant 10
	Social support	<p>“I also found when you made real friends in the army, they it didn't bother them what you were. Um, they you were their friend, you know? And you it just, you just fell into place with them. It didn't matter to them. But you'd be very careful what people were saying, and you would catch up on a conversation or something and you'd know, then you don't reveal anything.”</p> <p>“Cause people would particularly ask to go to Guildford. Umm. Well, they knew it was a dangerous place to be. But they could, I guess you could lead your life and you could enjoy yourself because you knew other people had your back, or if you were in another unit where there was only a handful, you didn't have that same feeling and you were kind of lonesome”</p> <p>“She, I think was, you know, trying to track me down because I remember my boss, he pulled me in the office and saying ohh, you know, he actually warned me about her, which I thought was amazing, you know?”</p>	Participant 6 Participant 9 Participant 2

being “targeted.” For example: “you just have to be careful of what you said, what you did... you had an act that you just put on you. You know, you tried to act straight, know a lot of people made up boyfriends that they didn't actually have” [participant 3]. They reported actively keeping everything “very beige” and not having “anything that would associate you with being LGBT,” to avoid having anything the SIB could use to “connect you in any way to being gay” [participant 4]. Some also described mentally being “always ready with my answer” [participant 1] in case they were confronted (“you just knew you have to be careful around them and not confirm anything” [participant 3]). Participants reported that the risk of being found out also resulted in them being very cautious and “mindful” of who their friends were and who they disclosed personal information to. This was also reported to include being cautious of who they associated

with, for example: “one of the things I was mindful of is that there were some, particularly some of the women, were a bit more overt than others, shall I say. And I think if you had that association, if you put yourself in that position all the time, you then become guilty by association, whether it's true or not.” [participant 2].

### Experiences of Negative Treatment During Service

Another key theme identified was the experience of negative treatment from peers and superiors, which ranged from verbal bullying to social exclusion to assault. Three subthemes were identified, namely, discrimination due to (suspected) sexual orientation, sexism, and sexual harassment. All participants reported an experience of negative treatment.

## Sexual Orientation Discrimination

Participants reported the experience of interpersonal and institutional discrimination during military service based on sexual orientation. A number of participants reported being gossiped about (“*always have people whispering*” [participant 8]) and facing verbal bullying: “*Well, you know, it’s always these derogatory comments and Oh well, you know what? and she’s a dike, I mean, you know, awful comments, really. You know, they’ve never used word lesbian oh she’s a dike She’s uh. You know, whatever. All their different horrible terminologies that soldiers and officers used*” [participant 4]. Participants also described social exclusion related to their LGB identity: “*some would actually turn their backs when you walked in if they found out you were gay, they turned their backs, you know, things like that*” [participant 6]. One participant also described a friend who was physically assaulted due to her sexual orientation. Some perceived such interpersonal discrimination to be particularly commonplace on mixed units, in that they were more likely to be targeted by men during training exercises or were more likely to have rumors spread about them being gay if they turned down a man. Participants described being “*accused*” [participant 10] and questioned about being gay when, for example, they were the only female in an all-male unit or when being visited by female friends during deployment.

In addition to being discharged and “*frog marched off*” [participant 6] for being gay, a few participants described institutional discrimination based on sexual orientation whereby “*a lot of the girls were, were hounded, I can’t say it any other way*” [participant 7] by the SIB. They described the common practice of “*witch-hunts*” [participants 10], “*block raids,*” and “*inhumane*” interviews [participants 8] as part of the distressing investigations to identify gay personnel. “*All they wanted you to do was sign a piece of paper saying that you were gay, and as soon as that was signed, you were out the next day.*” [participant 10]). Another participant described: “*at that point... there were a lot of witch hunts. The SIB, the RMP [Royal Military Police]. Umm, you know. Somebody could write to them. If you upset somebody, they could write, send an anonymous letter in saying ‘such and such of my unit..., she’s a lesbian. She’s gay. She’s made an approach to me, but I want to remain anonymous’. Umm and they would come in to the unit if the commanding officer allowed them, and you had no say. They would then literally, umm, come in, trash your room looking for anything. Could be a letter, even a photograph of you standing next to somebody who could be married, could be perfectly innocent photograph. You were hauled away.*” [participant 10]. Some participants reported being ordered to carry out these investigations themselves, which they found personally distressing and offensive. Participants also described institutional discrimination in terms of being sent to a psychiatrist or the military hospital for questioning, being suspended and

having a “*black mark on my career*” [participant 4] due to the military’s quick knee jerk reaction in managing sexual allegations. Importantly, institutional discrimination appeared to perpetuate more interpersonal discrimination, whereby “*people started treating me differently,*” “*And then of course, because I was right out in the open then, it was like the guys didn’t wanna know, or you know, and you’d made friends with some of them. And they just sort of turned their backs on you*” [participant 6], and superiors became more distant and reallocated them to isolated roles.

**Sexism** One participant reported perceiving the military as a “*very sexist organization*” [participant 4] and others reported daily “*microaggressions*” and “*passive aggressive*” experiences, such as having their ideas ignored, “*being mansplained*” [participant 5], and being “*expected to make the coffee*” [participant 4]. More blatant forms of sexism were also reported in terms of “*sport to employment opportunities*” [participant 10] and a lack of equality in promotions. For example, women were not allowed to join certain sports teams. One participant reported: “*Well, you know the guys would talk the talk, walk the walk. But we had to breakthrough that glass ceiling. You know, we had to be 10 times better than the best boy if you like, the best bloke. Uh, which I found thoroughly frustrating*” [participant 4], while another reported that you had to: “*be better than most of your male colleagues just to be on an even par with them*” [participant 1].

Participants reported facing a culture of toxic masculinity and being held to double standards about their sex life: “*you know, if you didn’t sleep with everyone in your unit, they assumed you were a lesbian. And if you did, then you were raving nymphomaniac*” [participant 4]. Some also reported perceiving that the process by which sexual harassment allegations could be made and the way they were dealt with (see “sexual harassment” subtheme) was also sexist.

## Sexual Harassment

Many participants reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment during their service, which included being “*touched inappropriately or would get a comment made*” [participant 8], “*having someone expose themselves to me*” [participant 4], or having “*somebody pushing you up against the wall or trying to force themselves upon you*” [participant 5]. Such harassment was enacted by both male civilians and army peers and occurred both off and on camp. They described sexual harassment by both male peers and superiors, such as having their boss/superior ask them (or move in) for a kiss and having soldiers/officers/sergeant majors coming into one’s bedroom (or hiding under their bed) trying to jump into bed. Two participants also reported sexual harassment by female seniors.

Participants described sexual harassment during service as a form of sexism, as merely one of the “*challenges women face*” [participant 3]. There was also some mention however that “*if you were gay, you’d be more likely to be selected for that treatment than somebody who wasn’t*” [participant 10]. Those who faced sexual harassment often reported sexism following such instances whereby they were told to not “*rock the boat*” when trying to report it: “*You know, they pay us a lot of money. And it was just brushed under the carpet and well done for you for kicking him out your room. Well, if I hadn’t been as robust as I am, that would have had a massive impact on a young, a young woman*” [participant 4]. Others reported perceived discrimination in not feeling able to report it as “*you wouldn’t be believed*” or that it would not be addressed given the military culture of “*just suck it up*” [participant 3]. Only one participant reflected that she chose to report it and “*didn’t feel that the system let me down when I chose to complain*” [participant 5]. Participants reported that experiencing sexual harassment left them being “*on your guard*” [participant 6] looking out for threats, avoiding situations (“*I wouldn’t allow myself to be in a situation where that could ever happen*” [participant 10]) and modifying their behavior (“*it probably made me dress and act more male*” [participant 5]) to manage the risk of further sexual harassment.

### Enjoyment and Social Support: Possible Buffering Factors

A theme related to the positive experiences was reported during service, which were sometimes described as helping reduce the wellbeing impact of having to conceal one’s sexual orientation and the discrimination faced during service. Subthemes that were identified included enjoyment of time in service and social support.

#### Service Enjoyment

A strong theme of overall enjoyment of their time in service was interpreted from the data. Participants reported that being in the military “*gave me meaning, gave me purpose, gave a sense of achievement*” [participant 3] and highlighted “*travelling the world,*” “*teamwork*” [participants 1 and 2], and “*lots of sports*” [participants 2 and 10] as some of the most common reasons they enjoyed their time in service. They described the “*comraderie-ship*” and “*friendships*” developed as some of the key highlights. For example: “*And secondly, actually that really good, solid friendships that you had with other women kind of creating that safe space, being able to create that environment and safety and fun as well together*” [participant 3]. Finally, a few also described enjoying being able to discover and explore their sexuality as a female in an all-female camp. Although all participants

described having faced significant negative experiences, time in the military was described as fulfilling.

#### Social Support

Social support was identified as another key buffering factor against the negative experiences faced during military service, both from straight peers who did not necessarily know the participants’ sexual identities and from other LGB service personnel who knew participants’ sexual orientation, either implicitly or through disclosure. Participants described emotional and practical benefits of the close friendships they were able to establish with peers. They reported a feeling of relief: “*it was a relief to actually say to them, right. You know, guys, I am gay, blah, blah, blah. This is my partner, blah, blah, blah. And they were like, So what? You know, you’ve met our wives, our girlfriends and boyfriends, whatever. And really, it’s no it makes no difference.*” [participant 3]. While most supportive friendships were described in the context of with other gay females (“*we were all in it together*” [participant 6]), positive friendships with heterosexual females were also reported (“*you had your own sort of group of friends that we all stuck together*” [participant 3]). The benefits of these relationships were also highlighted in the distress and feelings of loneliness reported by those who did not have such supportive friendships within the military. A few participants described supportive male friendships.

A few participants reported a feeling of safety provided by their superiors. They reported feeling protected by female LGB superiors (“*if it wasn’t for her and [her] being of the same orientation, I would have probably not come back to my unit*” [participant 9]) or that they themselves offered protection as a superior to other LGB soldiers (“*I did see two people in bed together... and I turned the light off, closed the door and said no, all clear. So I, I lied to my OC.*” [participant 5]). Others perceived the protection by other gay, female superiors to be particularly evident in certain postings, specifically the all-female camps (“*you were definitely protected being a gay woman there because lots of the instructors were... it was an open secret*” [participant 5]). The few who reported more supportive friendships with male superiors reported that “*I suspect most people, umm, knew. But again, if you were good at your job, and you didn’t do anything overtly, they were, they were happy*” [participant 7].

### Discussion

This qualitative study is among one of the first studies aimed at exploring the experiences of a cohort of UK female LGB veterans during their military service. Three main themes and seven subthemes were identified in the



data, which relate to the stressors and experiences participants faced during their military service as well as the ways they tried to manage these experiences.

All participants referred to the military's ban of LGB personnel that was implemented during their time in service. They consistently described the experience of fear in relation to the military-enforced consequences associated with being found out. To avoid being investigated and/or discharged from service, many participants reported exerting caution in who they affiliated with, who they trusted, and how they behaved and acted. Participants described the impact of the secrecy on their mental health and well-being, including distress in not being able to be their true selves, constantly being guarded and fearful, social exclusion, and alcohol misuse. Several participants reported the continuation of such difficulties years after their service ended, which most often related to a sense of ongoing guardedness. However, no participant in the current study was directly forced out of the AF due to their sexual identity, and it is possible that experiences may have differed had they left involuntarily. Previous research highlights that fear and anxiety related to having to conceal one's sexual identity during service are associated with later depression and PTSD symptoms (Cochran et al., 2013). As this sample excluded LGB female veterans meeting criteria of probable PTSD, it remains unclear whether the lived experiences and the impact of concealing sexual orientation during service would differ among those experiencing current PTSD.

Another main finding was the common experience of negative treatment in the form of sexual orientation discrimination, sexism, and sexual harassment. In line with findings highlighting frequent interpersonal and institutional discrimination among US LGB veterans (Livingston et al., 2019), all participants reported having faced sexual orientation discrimination ranging from derogatory comments to social exclusion to being investigated or discharged. This study further highlighted a seemingly high prevalence of overt and covert sexism, which included being "mansplained" or not taken seriously, not being considered for promotions, or being punished more severely than male counterparts for breaking a rule. This is consistent with previous reports of UK female veterans describing having faced sexist assumptions during service and being disadvantaged in opportunities to further their career (Baumann et al., 2022). Finally, in line with indications that up to 90% of UK female serving personnel may experience some form of sexual harassment (Ministry of Defence, 2018), participants described the frequent occurrence of sexual harassment (and assault) during their time in service and described behavioral changes employed to mitigate such risks. The data also suggests that it was a common occurrence that females were accused of being gay if they did not sleep with their male

counterparts, which some reports suggest may have been more prominent in mixed and male-dominant units. While such experiences were described as common for females in general, some perceived an increased risk of female LGB personnel being targeted with such accusations despite efforts made to conceal their sexual orientation.

Findings of the present study map onto previous research demonstrating high rates of bullying, harassment, and discrimination experienced by female veterans during service (Hendrikx et al., 2021a, b; House of Commons Defence Committee, 2022). However, the study provides some indication that LGB female veterans may potentially be at an increased risk of being targeted and may face additional stressors related to their sexual orientation. A previous report has demonstrated that of the female veterans reporting such adversity during their time in service, 21% perceived them as relating to their sexuality (while 85% perceived them as relating to their gender) (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2022). This indication that female LGB veterans may face stressors related to both their gender and SM group status is in line with the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003). The minority stress model describes a cumulative effect of minority identities on mental health, particularly emphasizing the impact of social factors such as discrimination and interpersonal prejudice. Notably, all participants in the current study perceived experiencing such discrimination and/or interpersonal prejudice due to being female or LGB. Female veterans who experience such adversity during service are at risk of later mental health difficulties (Baumann et al., 2022; Hendrikx et al., 2021a, b), and there is no reason to assume that this would not be the case for LGB female veterans. In fact, previous US research has already demonstrated a notable prevalence of PTSD, common mental health difficulties, and alcohol problems among LGB veterans (Cochran et al., 2013), though the potential link to specific forms of negative treatment during service is yet to be investigated. Such a focus is essential as female veteran research highlights that many may not report adverse experiences due to aspects of the military culture (Godier-McBard et al., 2021) and may face specific barriers in accessing support when care is needed (Godier-McBard et al., 2022a, b; Graham et al., 2022), which may similarly apply to LGB female veterans. US findings suggest that LGB female veterans may be more likely than non-LGB female veterans to experience harassment and feel unwelcomed at veteran health services and may delay or withdraw from care due to their concerns of interacting with other veterans (Shipherd et al., 2018).

The present findings that LGB female veterans' need to conceal their sexual orientation, the negative treatment experienced in relation to being female and LGB, and the associated experience of distress all align with the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003). More specifically, the data suggests that while females serving during this time were likely to

face an array of negative treatment, additionally identifying as LGB may have left them at risk of facing additional stressors and discriminatory experiences. Still, participants reported positive experiences that were suggested to buffer to some extent the impact of negative experiences and promote a level of resilience. Many reported a strong sense of enjoyment and fulfilment from their time in service, with their roles providing meaning and a sense of achievement. It remains to be investigated whether service enjoyment may serve as a protective factor and help mitigate the impact of discrimination based on sexual orientation and sexism. Supportive relationships were also identified as a particularly important buffering factor, in terms of providing friendship and connection, relief in disclosing their sexual orientation to close others, and a sense of protection from peers and superiors. LGB veterans who disclose their sexual orientation may experience increased social cohesion (Moradi, 2009), which has long been associated with improved well-being. Data among US transgender veterans has also highlighted the strong benefits of supportive connections, in that the link between discrimination and suicidal ideation may be attenuated by social support from other transgender veterans and being socially connected with SM and veteran communities (Carter et al., 2019). Such a buffering effect may similarly apply to UK LGB veterans, though further investigation is essential to derive more certain conclusions.

### Further Attention and Policy Considerations

Unsurprisingly, the findings together have highlighted the challenging experiences faced by LGB female veterans while serving under the “gay” ban. Although the ban was officially lifted over two decades ago (MoD, 2022), there likely remains a lasting impact on veterans who served before its repeal. While the MoD’s efforts to publicly recognize this past fault (MoD, 2021) may ameliorate some of the consequences of the ban on LGB veterans who served during it, the current findings indicate that further action is required. Firstly, there remains too little known about the association between negative treatment LGB veterans faced during service and the mental health impact. For example, it remains unclear whether LGB females who served under different ranks or services may have faced greater (or lower) risk of discrimination and negative treatment. Such attention is essential to ensure an understanding of the unmet needs of LGB veterans and the availability of appropriate psychological care. It is worth mentioning that the MoD has recently commissioned the Lord Etherton Inquiry to investigate the experiences of SM veterans who served under the ban, which is yet to be published. Such findings will be essential in moving forward to meet this unmet need. Secondly, US findings have highlighted that many personnel who served after the repeal of the “Don’t ask, Don’t Tell” policy still

report feelings of discomfort in disclosing their sexuality to the military (Biddix et al., 2013; McNamara et al., 2021b). Together with the current findings of negative treatment experienced during service, these findings highlight that additional research attention should focus on LGB individuals currently serving. While many participants described the lifting of the ban as the most positive change in the military, many reflected a perception that discrimination (both related to sexual orientation and sexism) continues in the current day. This leads to a third focus: the need to identify and appropriately address remaining stereotypes existing at the individual leader and military culture levels that may maintain the negative treatment of LGB personnel. Such efforts not only hold important implications for individuals’ wellbeing during and after service but may also benefit the military as promoting LGB acceptance may reduce attrition of LGB service members (McNamara et al., 2021a, b).

### Strengths and Limitations

There is limited prior research exploring the experiences of those who served under the ‘gay ban’ and the potential negative impact on their mental health. The key strength of the current study is being one of the first studies to the authors’ knowledge which explores the lived experiences of a sample of UK female LGB veterans who served under the ban.

The limitations of the present study require consideration. Firstly, the sample was identified via convenience sampling of an existing cohort of females involved with a female veteran charity and only included those identifying as LGB. Thus, transferability of the findings to wider female military groups or other SM groups, such as transgender female veterans, may be limited. Furthermore, the sample was self-selecting and transferability to those who did not consent to participate may also be limited. The sample also consists of older LGB female veterans who served under the time of the “gay” ban, and findings may therefore not be applicable to younger veterans (and serving personnel) who did not serve under the ban. We did not observe any differences across the different characteristics described in Table 1. Yet, it is important to note that many of the identified themes are consistent with findings of studies carried out with more recently serving personnel. For example, a recent narrative review of 30 (mostly US-based) papers published between 2000 and 2018 identified that LGBTQ Armed Forces personnel may experience poorer mental health, are more likely to experience sexual trauma, and face numerous barriers during service (Mark et al., 2019). Furthermore, as the sample did not include LGB female veterans meeting criteria for probable PTSD, the findings may not reflect the experiences of LGB female veterans who experienced more severe and/or continuous negative experiences during service and who currently meet PTSD criteria. Clearly, further research is necessary to understand the lived experiences of other groups

of LGB female veterans. A final limitation of the study is that it remained limited in being able to disentangle the experiences and impact of sexual orientation discrimination versus sexism. This should remain a crucial focus for further investigation as, for example, US literature suggests that LGB female veterans may be at greater risk of military sexual trauma than non-LGB female veterans (Mattocks et al., 2013).

## Conclusions

This study is among one of the first to focus on the lived experiences of UK LGB female veterans who served under the ban on gender and sexual minority personnel. Findings have highlighted the common negative treatment of LGB female veterans during their time in service and the potential long-term impact of such treatment. It has also offered evidence that while LGB veterans may face similar difficulties to non-LGB female veterans, they may face additional discrimination and challenges due to their sexual orientation. Such findings are in line with the minority stress model that outlines the potential cumulative effect of “holding” more than one minority position. These findings should encourage further attention to investigate and adequately support any unmet needs of this veteran population. Furthermore, the present findings suggest that more work is required to consider the potential ongoing nature of these difficulties within serving cohorts and to look inwards and challenge aspects of the military culture that may perpetuate such difficulties. While many LGB female veterans may overall have a fulfilling time in service, it remains essential that actions are taken to ensure they are protected from adverse experiences during service and that appropriate services are available when required.

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**Author Contribution** LJH, VW, and DM designed the study. LJH conducted the interviews. LJH and NB conducted the analysis, supported by VW. LJH and NB prepared the initial manuscript, and all authors contributed to the final version. DM supervised the project.

**Data Availability** The data analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflicts of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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