

Support communities key for military wives and partners facing employment and social challenges

March 6 2020

Military spouses can struggle to find and maintain employment and face severe restrictions on their social lives because of their partners' working patterns.

New research from Lancaster University and the University of Manchester, published in the *European Journal of Marketing*, studied the wives of British Army personnel.

Dr. Helen Bruce and Dr. Emma Banister found a husband's occupation placed constraints on both partners, and created challenges in particular for the wives when it came to gaining and retaining full-time employment, accessing often basic amenities, and enjoying social and leisure pursuits—which might include participating in choirs, the subject of the forthcoming *Military Wives* movie. To help them cope, they can come together to create communities with other wives and partners in similar situations.

As a result of their spouses' regular relocation through work, partners are often unable to find permanent employment and pursue their own career goals, and it is difficult for them to enjoy their [leisure time](#) due to factors such as a lack of childcare options or established family or social networks.

Lead author Dr. Bruce, of Lancaster University Management School,

said: "Frequent relocation of their husbands due to work hinders career development and disrupts social and familial networks. Such issues can lead to difficulties for wives and partners in achieving their immediate and long-term goals, thus having a detrimental impact on their overall wellbeing.

"Where work schedules are unpredictable and change at short notice, issues are intensified—the booking of holidays a long time in advance, for example, can become near-impossible.

"Partners can be forced to leave jobs when husbands are relocated, limiting household income as it can become difficult for them to find other employment—some employers may be reluctant to bring in workers if there is no guarantee of how long they will be able to remain in post. If work is available, there are often constraints on what types of employment it encompasses, with careers often sacrificed."

Dr. Bruce and Dr. Banister interviewed army wives in focus groups and individually, gaining insight into how marrying partners in roles where there can be regular disruption to living circumstances, or changes in work patterns, can impact them. There are more than 100,000 spouses and partners in the British Armed Forces who face regular relocation as their spouses are required to move to meet the needs of the service. Among them, approximately three-quarters have children, while around two-thirds of army families live in Service Family Accommodation—located close to the serving person's place of work but in often-inconvenient places for the purposes of employment outside the Armed Forces, for access to leisure and social activities, and far from retail facilities.

Women with children often find themselves away from traditional support networks of family, leaving them to take on childcare duties by themselves. This, in turns, impacts on employment potential for the

mothers.

Dr. Bruce added: "The wives and partners we spoke to described how hard it can be for them to participate in social and leisure activities, with the lack of support when it comes to childcare and the short notice with which their husbands' work schedules can change making it extremely difficult to make plans either as a couple or individually. This can lead to the wives feeling a sense of social isolation.

"Both partners in any relationship have important roles to play at home with their families, yet some jobs allow for little flexibility for workers, for instance, to be available at certain times to take care of their children."

The researchers found wives and partners often come together to help each other cope with the situations they find themselves in, developing collective as well as individual coping strategies and support both practically and emotionally.

Support is based on common experiences and challenges, but these communities can fall apart when members are relocated due to changes in their husbands' work, meaning they are vulnerable to being temporary in nature.

Dr. Banister, of Alliance Manchester Business School, said: "These groups comprise people who have shared experiences, but who have their own individual strategies for coping with the issues they encounter. The benefits of the groups include their knowledge building and exchange, learning from experience, and the ability to collaborate in problem-solving.

"The camaraderie and emotional support from these groups are meaningful sources of coping. The community support is empathetic and

offers solutions to daily challenges such as transporting children to school, going shopping miles from home and finding childcare to allow for nights out."

However, wives and partners whose lifestyles differ from those of other community members—be it through working full-time, having children of a different age, or living in different areas—can find they are excluded from the support networks.

"Our data suggests that wives and partners in employment were less likely to be involved in these communities, relying solely on independent coping, as were those who were older, had married later in life, or had older, more self-sufficient, children," added Dr. Banister.

The researchers believe overarching changes can be made to help wives and partners affected by their husbands' work.

"For the army wives we spoke to, a reduction in the unpredictability of their husbands' role—for example, in terms of working schedules and relocation, could lessen the impact on them," said Dr. Bruce. "However, the overall purpose of the UK Armed Forces, and their need to respond quickly to a range of events, provides a significant challenge to such changes.

"Options to help this group would include providing low-cost transport and childcare options to support wives and partners in their [employment](#) and [social activities](#)."

More information: Helen L. Bruce et al, Army wives' consumer vulnerability and communities of coping, *European Journal of Marketing* (2019). [DOI: 10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0148](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0148)

Provided by Lancaster University

Citation: Support communities key for military wives and partners facing employment and social challenges (2020, March 6) retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-03-key-military-wives-partners-employment.html>

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