

Sexism in Military Command Culture Manifested as Sexual Harassment/Assault

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Sexism is a relevant issue many women face on multiple levels: individual, organizational, institutional, and cultural. The American Psychological Association (2020) states that sexism can manifest as “discriminatory and prejudicial beliefs and practices directed against one of the two sexes, usually women” (para 1). This paper focuses on sexism in the military chain of command manifested as sexual harassment and sexual assault. The United States Code that guides military conduct defines sexual harassment as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and deliberate or repeated offensive comments or gestures of a sexual nature” (Complaints of Sexual Harassment, 2021). Sexual assault includes “the offenses of rape, sexual assault, forcible sodomy, aggravated sexual contact, abusive sexual contact, and attempts to commit such offenses” (Victims of Sexual Assault, 2006). By examining the historical genesis of sexism in the military, sexism in the military chain of command, military cultural norms and values, and characteristics of affected groups, it becomes clear that clinical psychologists must become agents of change.

Historical Genesis

Since the beginning of the United States military, women have supported the armed forces as nurses, seamstresses, and cooks. Women even disguised themselves as men and fought in the Civil War. When World War I came, women were allowed to enlist only for supportive roles and exclusively during the war period. World War II demanded that the military recruit women to a separate military branch (the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps) for positions beyond supportive roles but limited to non-combat positions. These positions were temporary, but with

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's support, Congress allowed enlisted women to become a permanent section of the Army as the Women's Army Corps in 1943. Other military branches soon followed suit; however, these female groups were not given the same benefits as their male counterparts (United States Accountability Office, 2020; Rohall et al., 2017).

In 1948, President Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act, which allowed women to serve as full-time, permanent members in all branches, which appeared to be a huge step for women's equal rights in the military. However, this act limited the percentage of women in each branch to only 2%, allowed the legal, involuntary discharge of women who became pregnant, limited the number of women officers, and barred women from combat positions. To further display the act's ineffectiveness, the Department of Defense authorized 300,000 men considered "low aptitude" to serve in the Vietnam War instead of expanding women's numbers. At the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, President Ford signed a public law that permitted women to serve in all service academies, hold command roles in non-combat units, and train together with men. In 2013, women were granted the right to serve in direct ground combat and choose their occupational specialties (United States Accountability Office, 2020; Rohall et al., 2017).

From the beginning of the U.S. military, men have been in dominant, full privileged positions. Historically, men viewed women in the military as inferior burdens (Rohall et al., 2017). Slowly, and only by the approval of men in power positions, women have gained what appears to be equal legal rights as men. As one may imagine, sexual harassment/assault has always been present in the military and became a more potent force once men and women began to train together and share barracks (sleeping areas) (Sadler et al., 2003).

Sexism Within the Military Chain of Command

Privilege Protected by Sexism

Some military leaders argue that there is no “rape culture” within the military (Bennett, 2018). These individuals agree that high rates of sexual harassment/assault in the military occur because of individual factors that recruits carry with them into military service, along with the notion that unwanted sexual contact is defined more broadly for military members than for civilians (Bennett, 2018). Indeed, some military members do not believe that sexism is at the root of sexual harassment/assault.

One gender group benefits from sexism in the military chain of command more than the other. The number of women and men who have experienced sexual harassment/assault in the military is very similar. However, due to the higher percentage of men enlisted, women experience sexual harassment/assault in the military at much higher rates than men (Bell et al., 2014b). In 2019, 81% of sexual assault victims identified as female, and 19% identified as male. Furthermore, 76% of perpetrators were identified as male, 4% were identified as female, and 20% were reported as unknown (Department of Defense, 2020a). Sexual harassment statistics were similar; in 2019, 80% of sexual harassment victims identified as female, 18% identified as male, and 2% were reported anonymously. However, the statistics on sexual harassment revealed a second factor: rank. Of note, the “largest single grouping of complainants by gender and paygrade were women in paygrades E1-E4” (paygrades E1-E4 correspond with the lowest ranking members of the military) (Department of Defense, 2020b, p 6). Moreover, of the percentage of higher-ranking officers who reported sexual harassment (officers made 4% of total complaints), women officers made up 61% of those complaints (Department of Defense, 2020b). A study by Harris et al. (2018) confirmed that women of lower rank have the highest risk of

experiencing sexual harassment. The Department of Defense (2020b) statistics show that even women of higher rank have higher risks of experiencing sexual harassment than males.

A 2020 report from the United States Accountability Office to Congress revealed that the attrition rate from 2004 to 2018 for female active duty, enlisted, and commissioned officers was much higher than for their male peers, resulting in a much smaller pool of female availability for leadership opportunities. Two of the six reasons listed for high women attrition rates were sexual assault and a sexist chain of command (United States Accountability Office, 2020). Indeed, sexual harassment/assault is a manifestation of sexism in the military chain of command. Women who experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault reported that they left or intended to leave their military careers earlier than planned compared to their non-victimized peers (Daniel et al., 2019; Rosellini et al., 2017; Sadler et al., 2003).

It appears that sexism in the military chain of command protects male privilege (Daniel et al., 2019; Department of Defense, 2020a; Department of Defense, 2020b; Sadler et al., 2003; United States Accountability Office, 2020). The consequent question is, “Why would female privilege be threatening?” Young and Nauta (2013) suggest that females as agents in equal numbers to males may threaten male privilege. The number of females in the military has grown from 14.6% in 2000 to 16.9% in 2019 (Department of Defense, 2019). Young and Nauta (2013) also suggest that females with the potential to wield physical force (exemplified in military combat roles) may threaten male privilege. A study by LeardMann et al. (2013) revealed that female service members who deployed in combat positions were at significantly higher risk for sexual stressors than female service members who deployed in non-combat positions. Additionally, females in leadership roles may be threatening to male privilege in the military.

The number of females in active-duty officer positions has grown from 14.4% in 2000 to 18.4% in 2019 (Department of Defense, 2019).

Impact on Affected Groups

Impact on Women

Women who have experienced military sexual harassment/assault have reported subsequent psychological distress (Bonnes, 2017; Burns et al., 2014). Higher rates of treatment for mental health and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), along with suicide attempts, demotions, and attrition, exemplify the emotional distress experienced by victims (Rosellini et al., 2017). Also, women who have experienced military sexual harassment/assault were more likely to be later diagnosed with a personality disorder (Kimerling et al., 2007). While personality disorders explain some symptoms, Bell et al. (2018) suggest that some of these personality disorder diagnoses do not consider other confounding variables, such as childhood-onset and childhood sexual violence. The diagnosis of Complex PTSD challenged inaccurate personality disorder diagnoses in response to complex sexual trauma symptoms (Bell et al., 2018). Female sexual harassment/assault victims have not only suffered emotionally but have also been haunted by inaccurate life-long psychological diagnoses.

Even when victims of sexual harassment/assault reported their experiences, the reporting process leaves something to be desired. Effective leadership responses were associated with decreased emotional distress and increased retention intentions among sexual harassment/assault victims, while ineffective leadership responses were associated with increased emotional distress and decreased retention intentions (Daniel et al., 2019). Leaders in the military chain of command must respond to sexual violations effectively. When victims see that their sexual

violation report was responded to and handled well, they displayed better functioning and fewer PTSD symptoms long after the proceeding was over (Bell et al., 2014a). On the other hand, when victims see that their sexual violation report was not responded to and handled poorly, they perceived the military as having failed them in effectively preventing and responding to their sexual trauma. These “perceptions of institutional betrayal were associated with increased odds of attempting suicide after military sexual trauma” (Monteith et al., 2016, p 750).

Sexist environments thrive off the attitudes and behaviors of the commanding officer. For example, when women felt that leadership actively disrupted sexual harassment and displayed respectful behavior, they reported less sexual harassment, were more satisfied with the outcome of their sexual harassment report, and viewed sexual harassment training as more effective (Buchanan et al., 2014).

Impact on Transgender Women

It is worthy to note the lack of information on how transgender women are affected by sexism in the military. Individuals who identify as transgender have experienced turbulent legal assertions regarding their right to serve in the military openly. Recently, President Biden set an executive order enabling all qualified Americans to serve their country in uniform (Exec. Order No. 14,004, 2021). A study by Beckman et al. (2018) revealed that 30% of transgender men in the sample who served as women in their military service reported sexual assault, and 15.2% of transgender women in the sample who served as men in their military service reported sexual assault, indicating that military sexual harassment/assault is a relevant concern for the transgender community.

Impact on Male Victims

Although women are at a much higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment/assault in the military, males also report these experiences. Compared to female sexual assault experiences, males are much more likely to experience threatened or actual physical injury during the sexual assault (Bell et al., 2018). Furthermore, men who report sexual violence in the military are more likely to report experiencing more than one occurrence in the last year (Bell et al., 2018). Men are more likely to identify abuse or humiliation as the intent of the assault but are more likely to describe it as hazing (Bell et al., 2018). Additionally, the struggle with identity following an assault may be more salient for males due to the military's emphasis on what it means to be a "real man" (Bell et al., 2018). It is estimated that many males do not report their sexual harassment/assault experiences because they do not want to be accused of lying, being at fault, or being "gay" regardless of sexual orientation (Sadler et al., 2018a). Most perpetrators are male for both men and women victims (Bell et al., 2018; Department of Defense, 2020a).

Cultural Norms and Values that Sustain Sexism in the Military

Values

From the first moments of basic training, young military members learn militarized masculine-warrior values (Do & Samuels, 2021). Sadler et al. (2018b) propose that the dehumanizing tactics used to extinguish hesitation in war impact attitudes toward those who are non-conforming to the traditional masculine military standards (i.e., those considered "vulnerable" or "weak"). Do & Samuels (2021) articulate that, "throughout history, many cultures considered military service a rite of passage to adulthood, where men learn toughness, transform bodies, construct masculinities, and eliminate what was considered effeminate" (p 25).

Strength and control are two military norms of high value. Being victimized is at odds with the military culture's emphasis on strength and personal control, which may create a culture where males are less likely to report their experiences of sexual trauma (Bell et al., 2018; Sadler et al., 2018a). Victims are at odds, then, with their sense of military identity (i.e., they may feel like they were "weak" for having "allowed" themselves to be victims) (Bell et al., 2018). Ironically, lack of self-control is a characteristic linked to perpetrators of sexual assault (Bennett, 2018). A discussion of this paradox has not yet occurred in the military context.

A hierarchical system is arguably the largest factor in the military's values that sustains sexism. A hallmark 2003 study by Sadler et al. revealed that the frequency of women reporting sexual assault was strongly associated with commanding officer or immediate supervisor behaviors. "When officers engaged in quid pro quo behaviors, women reported a five-fold increase in rape. Officers allowing or initiating sexually demeaning comments or gestures towards female soldiers was associated with a three to four-fold increase in likelihood of rape" (Sadler et al., 2003, p 268). Furthermore, rates of sexual violence are higher in units where the commanding officer is neutral or indifferent to abuse, widening the standard of sexist behavior from encouraging explicit sexism to failing to intervene in the behavior (Sadler et al., 2017).

In 2018(b), Sadler et al. focused on the central role of leadership in preventing and responding to sexual violence in the military. The authors asserted that a military unit leader is responsible for the unit's culture because of the trickle-down effect of leadership attitudes and morals to lower hierarchy levels. Since more males hold leadership roles in the military than females, the male-dominated chain of command and culture of power (along with society-based norms of sexism) contribute to perpetuated sexual victimization (Sadler et al., 2018b). Barron

and Ogle's 2014 study revealed similar trends among Military Training Instructors (MTI) and trainees; MTIs who indicated higher levels of hostile sexism on a self-report survey were more likely to be reported for the maltreatment of female trainees, specifically.

Impediments to Gaining Privilege

One of the most prominent deterrents for military females in gaining privilege is leadership attitudes. Some military members deny the role of sexism in military sexual harassment/assault (Bennett, 2018). Ironically, explanations of sexual harassment/assault and recommendations for prevention from these leaders were in and of themselves based on sexist ideas. Sexist leadership attitudes protect male leadership privilege and pose a significant obstacle for females gaining privilege. Another barrier is the sheer number of males versus females. As outlined before, males far outnumber females in all branches (Department of Defense, 2019). These numbers denote more males in leadership roles, which imply higher odds for sexist attitudes in leadership and protected male privilege. Unfortunately, female attrition rates reinforce this system of oppression (United States Accountability Office, 2020).

Several social-historical myths keep sexism invisible and justified in the military. Rape myths are "a set of largely false cultural beliefs that were thought to underlie sexual aggression perpetrated against women" (Edwards et al., 2011, p 761). A few examples of rape myths include that women enjoy rape (i.e., women mean yes when they say no and enjoy forcible sex), that women ask to be raped (i.e., the belief behind phrases such as "she was walking at night by herself," "she is promiscuous," and "she was asking for it wearing that outfit"), and that women lie about being raped (i.e., women lead men on then cry rape to get back at men) (Edwards et al., 2011).

Another social-historical myth that keeps sexism invisible in the military is that women are weak and inferior to men. Historically, this belief presented itself in that women were only allowed supporting service roles (Rohall et al., 2017). Currently, an example of this belief presents itself in that women's physical fitness test standards are less strenuous than those for men. Consequently, there are many male narratives that women's standards are not the "real" standards but are mediocre (Do & Samuels, 2021).

Characteristics of Affected Groups

The worldview of females as the oppressed group includes feelings of fear, defense of the status quo, and hints of non-compliance to a sexist system. Female victims in the military report hesitation to access formal sources of help after sexual harassment/assault due to fear surrounding negative career consequences, retaliation, victim-blaming, social ostracism, betraying unit cohesion, and the risk of going public (Bell et al., 2018). Sexual harassment/assault victims experience feelings of fear that their reports will not be kept confidential, that nobody will believe their experiences, and that no action will occur (Bell et al., 2014a; Sadler et al., 2003). Women as an oppressed group in a sexist military system also express defense of the status quo. Sadler et al. (2003) found that some women did not report their experiences because they thought rape was just a part of military service. The mindset of "that's just the way it is" has seen intergenerational transmission in many military women.

Along with feelings of fear and defense of the status quo, women are showing hints of non-compliance to a sexist system in the military. This non-compliant attitude is evident in the number of sexual assault reports made from 2010 to 2019. Statistics from the Department of Defense (2019) revealed a 9.85% increase in female active-duty members from 2010 to 2019.

Furthermore, the Department of Defense (2020a) revealed a 163.1% increase in sexual assault reports from 2010 to 2019. The number of sexual assault reports is increasing faster than the number of women joining the active-duty military. It appears that fewer military members are remaining silent.

The worldview of males as the non-oppressed group includes feelings of self-justification and defensiveness, awareness of the issue, and an ability to create a necessary change. Feelings of self-justification and defensiveness are apparent due to the depiction of military sexual assault as a few scandalous, isolated incidents and military sexual assault perpetrators as a few “bad apples” (MacKenzie et al., 2020). According to the United States Accountability Office (2020), military leaders have identified sexual assault and a sexist chain of command as components of high female attrition rates. Of note, the study by Sadler et al. (2018a) revealed that many male military leaders were unaware of male victimization. There is much work left in combatting male victimization in the military.

Military men, specifically those in leadership positions, carry a distinct advantage in creating change in the oppressive system. Empirical evidence supports that lower-ranking females are at greater risk of experiencing sexual harassment and assault if their unit leader encourages, displays, or fails to intervene in sexist behavior (Barron & Ogle, 2014; Sadler et al., 2003; Sadler et al., 2017; Sadler et al., 2018b). By discouraging and intervening in sexist behavior and modeling appropriate respect for women, males in leadership positions have the ability to significantly lower rates of sexual harassment/assault. Men in the military chain of command can also enforce effective responses in sexual harassment/assault proceedings and the laws and regulations surrounding consequences to such behavior.

Clinical Psychologists as Agents of Oppression

Clinical psychologists in the military hold a unique position of rank. Although military clinical psychologists can either be civilians or enlisted members, professionals in this position are highly regarded and generally viewed as holding an officer rank (Reger et al., 2008). This unique position of rank allows military clinical psychologists to create effective change. Clinical psychologists could implement sexual harassment/assault educational training and can combat sexist attitudes in this way. Military clinical psychologists need to support victims of sexual harassment/assault who seek out assistance. Providing psychoeducation regarding gender roles and rape myths can help correct societal messages interfering with recovery. Also, clinical psychologists in the military can screen all (male and female) clients for experiences of sexual harassment/assault (Bell et al., 2014b; Edwards et al., 2011).

Kimmerling et al. (2007) suggest that clinical psychologists should screen for PTSD, depression, and suicide risk in sexual harassment/assault victims. On top of that, Monteith et al. (2016) recommend assessing a client's perception of the military's institutional response to their experience. Both males and females who had positive and satisfactory reporting experiences expressed improved well-being many years after discharge (Bell et al., 2014a). Clinical psychologists must advocate for all victims of sexual harassment/assault in report proceedings and within other military roles to create change in the sexist attitudes perpetuating an environment where such sexually violating behaviors are accepted.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to establish evidence that sexism lives in the military chain of command and perpetuates sexual harassment/assault occurrences. Many implications were set

forth for the unique role that civilian psychologists hold within the military institutional system. Explanations of the historical genesis of sexism in the military, sexism within the military chain of command, cultural norms and values that perpetuate sexism in the military, and characteristics of affected groups all exposed the mechanisms that perpetuate sexism in the military. Many women are affected by sexism individually and within organizational, institutional, and cultural structures. Military clinical psychologists must seize their opportunity to be agents of change and support female privilege to combat sexism in the military.

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