**Addressing the knowledge gap: sexual violence and harassment in the UK Armed Forces.**

**Abstract**

Despite media interest in alleged sexual violence and harassment in the UK military, there remains a paucity of UK-based peer-reviewed research in this area. Ministry of Defence and service-specific reports support the suggestion that UK service personnel may be at risk of experiencing sexual harassment. These reports however highlight a reluctance by service personnel to report sexual harassment through official channels. In this article we discuss the paucity of UK-based research pertaining to the prevalence and impact of sexual harassment in the military, explore potential reasons for this gap in knowledge and outline future directions and priorities for academic research.

**Key Messages**

• Service-specific reports from the Army and the Royal Navy and Marines suggest that unwanted sexualised behaviour is common in the UK Armed Forces.

• Despite this and recent media interest, there remains a lack of peer reviewed research on sexual violence and harassment in the UK Armed Forces.

• Hyper-masculinity in the military and a reluctance to report sexual assault through official channels may have contributed to a lack of academic focus on this issue.

• International research points to a number of detrimental outcomes associated with sexual harassment in the military, this needs to be understood in UK context.

• A programme of UK-based academic research is required to ascertain the scale and impact of the problem.

**Introduction**

Sexual harassment can be defined as “unwanted conduct of a sexual nature directed at an individual with the purpose or effect of violating his or her dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual”[1]. Sexual harassment in the workplace is associated with poor mental and physical health, and poor job-related outcomes[2]. Male-dominated occupations such as the Armed Forces have been linked to higher rates of sexual assault and harassment[3], suggesting service personnel may be particularly at risk. Indeed, research carried out in the UK by Opportunity Now (Project 28-40)[4] found that the highest rates of sexual harassment by occupation were within the Uniformed and Armed Services, with 23% of women indicating they had been sexually harassed in the previous 3 years.

The media maintains an interest in sexual violence and harassment in the UK Armed Forces. Most recently the controversy surrounding the order for new inquests into the deaths of Private Cheryl James and Private Sean Benton, two of four soldiers who died at the Princess Royal Barracks in Deepcut between 1995 and 2002[5,6], and the suicide, following an allegation of rape, of Royal Military Police Corporal Anne-Marie Ellement[7]. The Deepcut Review[8], an investigation of the circumstances surrounding the first two deaths, led to the suggestion of a culture of bullying and sexual abuse at the Princess Royal Barracks, Deepcut. Furthermore, the recent inquest into the death of Private Cheryl James highlighted historical failings in the Army’s duty of care and sparked media suggestion of a highly sexualised environment in which personnel in a position of authority perpetrated both physical and sexual abuse[9].

Despite this, there is a lack of UK-based peer-reviewed research exploring the issue of sexual harassment in the UK Armed Forces. This is in comparison to a large body of international research focusing on this area. In particular, researchers in the US have built up a plethora of academic research investigating military sexual trauma (MST) ([10] for an overview of policy and research trends in the US). The aim of this personal view is to discuss the paucity of UK-based research pertaining to the prevalence and impact of sexual harassment in the military, explore potential reasons for this gap in knowledge and outline future directions and priorities for academic research.

**What do we know about the prevalence and impact of sexual harassment in the UK Armed Forces?**

There is little data available looking at the prevalence of sexual harassment in the UK Armed Forces. In 2004, following increased media interest and complaints, the UK Equal Opportunities Commission began an investigation of sexual harassment against women in the Armed Forces. In response to this, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) embarked on an Action Plan to prevent and deal with sexual harassment[11]. In 2006, the MOD published a research report[12] supporting suggestions that sexualised behaviours were common in the Armed Forces. This report stated that 99% of servicewomen surveyed had experienced jokes, stories, language or material of a sexual nature. Furthermore, 67% had encountered sexual behaviours directed at them, varying from unwelcome comments to sexual assault[12]. Following these findings, the MOD began the implementation phase of its action plan, aiming to “create an environment in the Armed Forces in which harassment is recognised as inappropriate and preventable”. In 2008, the commission concluded that the MOD had put the appropriate procedures in place to tackle sexual harassment. This included a robust complaints process, support for staff reporting harassment, and emphasis on a lack of tolerance for harassment[11].

Recent reports however suggest that sexual harassment may still be an issue in the UK Armed Forced. Service-specific reports published in 2015 suggest that inappropriate sexualised behaviour is still common. In the Army Sexual Harassment Report[13], 90% of service personnel had experienced sexualised behaviours, and 4% reported an upsetting experience involving targeted sexual behaviours in the last 12 months. Similarly, the Royal Navy and Royal Marine Sexual Harassment survey[14] reported over 90% of personnel had experienced sexual jokes/stories or sexually explicit language, and 2% reported a sexual assault in the past 12 months. It is important to highlight that men also report being subjected to sexual harassment and assault in the Armed Forces. The Army Sexual Harassment Report[13] found that 3% of servicemen had experienced an upsetting experience involving targeted sexualised behaviour in the past 12 months[13].In addition these reports highlight low rates of reporting, often due to fear of repercussions and negative effects on their career[13,14].

Notwithstanding, these reports emphasise the extent to which a sexualised environment characterised by sexual jokes and ‘banter’ is common in the UK Armed Forces. It is important, however, to view this within the context of a hyper-masculine military culture. Whilst the majority of the service personnel surveyed report experiencing sexualised behaviours of this type, there is no indication that this had a detrimental effect. Indeed, hyper-masculine ‘banter’, including that of a sexual nature, has been described as a core component and resource for fostering camaraderie within the masculinised environment of the military[12,15]. As such, it may be important for researchers to distinguish between sexualised behaviours that have a deleterious effect, and those that form a part of what is considered acceptable in this cultural context. To be clear, this is not to suggest that inappropriate sexual behaviours might on occasion be dismissed as mere ‘banter’, or as ‘par for the course’ of military life. Rather, research into sexual harassment would benefit from a nuanced cultural exploration of the ‘boundaries’ that service personnel draw up for themselves regarding what is and is not considered acceptable, and how such boundaries are negotiated, maintained, managed and policed.

**What are the potential reasons for the knowledge gap?**

There are a number of possible reasons for the lack of focus and academic research on sexual violence and harassment in the UK Armed Forces. Firstly, a general acceptance of hyper-masculine banter and behaviour as part of the military culture is apparent[12,15]. Qualitative data from the Equal Opportunities/MOD report[12] suggested that being ‘macho’ was an important part of men’s identity in the military, and sexual objectification of women was common. Indeed, the servicewomen interviewed generally accepted that derogatory and offensive language and behaviour was part of working in a male-dominated environment.

Secondly, the mechanisms of reporting do not appear to be effective in capturing the true extent of the problem. The MOD have policies and procedures in place to deal with complaints of sexual harassment[17], yet formal channels of complaint are found to be the least utilised method of resolution[12]. Indeed, only 3% of Army personnel and 15% of Navy personnel who reported having an upsetting experience related to sexualised behaviour made a formal complaint[13,14]. As discussed above, underreporting is often due to a fear of potential negative consequences on the individual’s career[12,13,14].

A final reason is that the focus of the recent media in the UK on ‘hazing’, or the initiation of new male recruits in the form of sexual assault and rape would suggest that such behaviour is used to intimidate new recruits in the knowledge that perpetrators are rarely prosecuted [16]. Service-specific reports also indicate lower ranks are more likely to experience targeted sexualised behaviours[13] and the higher the rank of the perpetrator the less likely the victim is to make a formal complaint[12]. This tendency to accept sexualised behaviours and harassment as part of the military culture, and to not report sexual harassment, is likely to have contributed historically to underreporting and a lack of recognition of sexual harassment as a problem.

**What are the future directions and priorities for academic research in the UK?**

Considering the prevalence indicated in the reports outlined above, it is imperative that UK academics begin to focus on the scale and impact of this issue on both victims and the UK Armed Forces as a whole. The male-dominated nature of the military is set to become increasing pertinent as greater numbers of women join the Armed Forces. It is clear from US research and UK reports that there are both male and female victims of sexual harassment in the military. However, it is reported that UK servicewomen are more likely be offended by sexualised behaviours, and to experience targeted sexualised behaviours compared to servicemen[13.14]. The Equal Opportunities/MOD report[12] indicated that servicemen saw sexual banter and male bonding as being an important part of the military culture, and that this was inhibited by the presence of women. Whilst it was felt by some that equal opportunities training programmes were making a difference, it will be important to focus on the impact of increasing numbers of servicewomen and the integration of women into the male-dominated military culture on the prevalence of sexual harassment.

Research conducted in the US and internationally points to a number of detrimental outcomes associated with experiencing sexual harassment during military service. A number of psychological difficulties are reported, including increased symptoms of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorders and sleep problems[10,18]. Furthermore, individuals who have experienced MST have more problems readjusting to civilian life[19], and MST is associated with increased risk of homelessness following discharge[20]. Whilst there are a number of differences between the UK and US militaries making comparison questionable, it is clear that sexual violence and harassment makes service personnel more vulnerable to psychosocial problems. Indeed it is of note that sexual assault in general is associated with greater risk of PTSD than exposure to other traumatic events[21]. Although these findings give us some insight into the psychological impact on victims of sexual harassment in the military, UK-based research is needed to better understand the impact in the UK context.

Not only are there likely to be detrimental effects on the individuals as a result of sexual harassment, but also on the military as an organisation. The Armed Forces represents a distinct environment in which day-to-day exposure to colleagues and workplace is much higher than most civilian jobs[13]. As such, those who experience sexual harassment may be forced to spend a lot of time around the perpetrator. Both the Army and the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Sexual Harassment surveys[13,14] report that a number of service personnel who had experienced sexual harassment felt uncomfortable at work, no longer enjoyed their work, and in particular had lost respect for those involved. This is likely to have a negative effect on the individual’s ability and commitment to work, and in turn may be damaging to unit cohesion and operational effectiveness[13]. Furthermore, individuals may even decide on the basis of an upsetting experience that they no longer want to serve in the Armed Forces, making this a potentially retention-negative issue for the MOD. As such, research is needed to ascertain the effect that sexual harassment has on the operational effectiveness of the Armed Forces as a whole.

In order to effectively deal with and prevent sexual harassment in the UK Armed Forces, an understanding of both victim and perpetrator is required. UK reports suggest that victims of sexual harassment tend to be female, young and of lower ranks[12,13,14]. Those responsible for sexual harassment are more often male than female, and in positions of power[12,13,14]. However pre-service (i.e. socio-demographic background, psychological problems) and in-service determinants (i.e. exposure to combat, gender ratio of units) are currently unknown. To develop effective preventative initiatives that educate and train service personnel and provide early intervention strategies to help those who experience sexual harassment requires an enhanced understanding of these issues.

**Conclusions**

MOD and service-specific reports suggest that UK service personnel may be at particular risk of experiencing sexual harassment, and demonstrate existing policy for dealing with sexual harassment [17]. However, these reports also highlight a reluctance by service personnel to report sexual harassment through official channels. Independent UK-based academic research is necessary to ascertain the scale of the problem. Moreover, given the deleterious impact on mental health and wellbeing, and workplace satisfaction, as well as the overall operational effectiveness of the military, such research is imperative to identify the risk factors and outcomes of sexual harassment. A systematic research programme–along the lines of that which exists in the US – is urgently needed. This will enable the development of effective strategies to: reduce the prevalence of sexual harassment in the UK Armed Forces, and inform clinicians and service providers of the specific needs of victims of sexual harassment in-service.

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