

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Sexual Harassment Lingers in the Military \*

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In the U.S. Army, Gene C. McKinney was a Sgt. Major, their highest non-commissioned rank. McKinney is charged with 20 counts of sexual harassment against six women. This is only the one case of sexual harassment in the military. Psychologists and sociologists are trying to find out what conditions influence sexual harassment.

The U.S. Department of Defense defines sexual harassment as *"a form of sexual discrimination that involves deliberate or repeated unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature."* The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission notes that conduct is harassment if:

- It interferes with work.
- Objections to it can hurt a person's job status.
- It is explicitly or implicitly a condition of employment.
- It creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment.

Previously, American women have been limited to noncombatant roles in the military. The military has traditionally maintained organizational obstacles to equal treatment of women. However, in the Persian Gulf War, women were killed in action, even though they were not in the combat infantry.

A contributing factor is the **sex ratio** in the service. Typically there are six men for every woman. These men are also *self-selected*. They tend to be relatively young, with **macho or conservative attitudes**. Historically, these young men are there to *"prove their manhood."* The military has a cultural tradition of male bonding in the face of danger. They are used to having a dominant role in relation to women.

This is intensified by the **rigid hierarchical structure** of the military, which can contribute to continued harassment. Those in the more-powerful majority – typically men – resist sharing their power, especially if it gains them social and economic advantages. In the military, women are relatively powerless. Women with few resources – like an unmarried enlistee with a child – are the most vulnerable. With little power, they can't afford to lose their job. These women believe that filing complaints is useless. Without any sense of control at work, this makes them feel helpless, and it damages their view of the military.

**Good leadership** makes a big difference. When commanding officers do not tolerate sexual harassment, violations are more likely to be reported. When reports lead to action, this reduces the probability of future harassment. On the other hand, when officers are lax in enforcing harassment policies, the opposite is true. In Army units, researchers found that – when confidence in the leaders was high and soldiers of both sexes thought their leaders supported them – harassment was lower. This was not so in units whose leaders did not clearly define inappropriate behavior. *"Some men...tend to behave in a sexually harassing way when local norms seem to suggest that they can get away with it."*

Only about 4-6% of sexual harassment incidents lead to formal complaints. However, more women *informally* reported harassment to someone – coworker or supervisor. Informal reports rose from 10% in 1988 to 40% in 1995. This increase in complaints makes the problem seem to be getting worse, even though the actual number of incidents has decreased.

Although sexual harassment in the military has declined in the last decade, it is far from gone. In a 1995 study of the military services, at least half of the women (and about 1 in 8 men) complained of unwanted sexual attention. In 1994, 12% of enlisted personnel on active duty were women, and 16% of the new recruits were women.

In the U.S. Army alone, sexual harassment costs \$250 million a year. This is due to lost productivity, absenteeism, transfers, and personnel replacement costs.

The uncomfortable or hostile environment created by sexual harassment is another cost. In the Army, where soldiers may have to lay down their lives for each other, they need to trust one another. Military leaders are greatly worried that harassment hurts unit cohesiveness or *"military readiness."* In Army support units, those with high levels of sexual harassment had low levels of readiness and cohesion.

The hierarchical structure that supports harassment can be used to combat it. With their rigid adherence to rules and their chain of command – if military leaders enforce sanctions against harassment – they have the best environment to reduce it. This is the view of psychologist Russell [Hibler](#), president of the division of the American Psychological Association that studies the military.

*"When the military works well, it's a paragon of mental health procedures. Clear guidelines and consequences come into place quickly."*

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**If women meet the specifications for any position,  
they deserve the respect given to men in that position.**

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Before I finished this article, I happened to talk with some military people. They raised a point that was not previously discussed. Their consensus was that – for the same job – women need to meet the same standards as men. Especially in the military – *if these standards are necessary to do the job adequately* – women cannot be judged differently.

A double standard in any context leads to discrimination. In turn, sexual discrimination can become an excuse for sexual harassment. For any position, women who meet the same qualifications as men deserve the same level of respect.

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\* Adapted from Nathan [Seppa's](#) "Sexual harassment in the military lingers on," and "What constitutes sexual harassment?" *The APA Monitor*, May, 1997, pages 41-42.