

Impacts of sexual harrassment and assault



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The impact of sexual harassment and assault in the army towards the victims ideally affects their psychological and physical health. These crimes consistently contribute to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, alcohol or other substance use disorder, suicidal and/or self-harm behavior. (PHCoE, 2019). According to the Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, fiscal year 2018, there were 7, 623 reports of sexual assault involving service members as either victims or the subjects of criminal investigations in fiscal year 2018; 6, 053 of these reports were made by service members. (DOD, 2018)

Why do cases of sexual harassment and sexual assault continue to take place in the Army, despite all the training and education that takes place? It's not because it has not been reported and it's not because soldiers are not educated or trained, but because of several reasons: fear, shame, embarrassment, and sense of entitlement to treating the victim with no regard or respect. Sexual assault and harassment have been and still is an overwhelming problem in the military despite the numerous initiatives outlined to end the vice. Ending and tackling this problem is necessary to safeguard human rights, ensure military readiness, and address the issue of health concerns.

Over the years, many theories have been put forward to explain why sexual assault happens in our society. According to the military-wide survey done, alcohol use is a contributing factor and was involved in 62 percent of assaults in women. When victims do report assaults, they are often reluctant to come forward, afraid of being retaliated against, if the case is not handled well. According to an article by NY Times, there were 6, 000 unrestricted

report of sexual assault in the military but only 300 cases were prosecuted. The Pentagon also reported that the military took “disciplinary action” in the 65 percent of the cases. But the punishment usually was dealt by commanders at their discretion, outside of the court system, and could be as a stern admonishment. (Philips, 2019).

The role of the commanders in the military justice system plays a critical part in addressing the issues of sexual assault. In the cases of sexual assault and harassment in the military, victims can be punished. There are times when commanders do take disciplinary or legal action against sexual assault survivors for infractions committed related to the sexual assault due to underage drinking, fraternization, or adultery. This and other negative actions directed at survivors are often perceived as retaliation for reporting and can have devastating effects on the survivor’s sense of safety, trust, and well-being and lead to an array of problems that affect the survivor’s future significantly beyond leaving the military.

Regardless of the zero-tolerance policy and the multitude of trainings and briefs given on the topic, the number of sexual assaults in the Army continues to rise. A new survey of active-duty troops has found that the number of sexual assaults in the U. S. military rose by 38% from 2016 to 2018, a dramatic increase that comes despite years of efforts to halt rape and other sex crimes in the ranks. (Kime, 2019). The increase may not be due to an actual increase of crimes but possibly due to the victims feeling more secure and safe in reporting the crime itself. Even with trainings and mandatory briefings, nearly more than half of service members regret making a report. With commanders being in charge of these crimes, cases

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were simply never referred to court martial proceedings by a commanding officer, which then leaves soldiers with retaliation and backlash from the unit.

In 2013, the National Defense Authorization Act required increased training around sexual harassment and assault for military service members and required the branches to allow anonymous reporting of crimes. Over the years, the Army has been working to bring forward ways of preventing sexual assault with program like Sexual Harassment and Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP). The training from that time has only enhanced its method and made soldiers more aware of cases. The implemented programs help identify and prevent sexual assault and harassment to understand methods of reaching out and helping others in need.

Soldiers are all too familiar with typical training: PowerPoint slides, mandatory briefings, initial trainings, refreshers, the list goes on and on. These types of training succeed only if it actually addressed the root problem: preventing sexual harassment or assault from happening in the first place. Training in the Army exists for a different reason altogether and that is for the commanders to check the box as complete. Soldiers being trained describe it as a waste of time because either, it does not apply to them or they simply did not care. Training and educating are essential but never enough. To actually prevent sexual assault and harassment, the Army needs to create a culture in which soldiers treat one another with respect.

The Soldiers who serve in the Army should not have to be forced to work in an environment where the culture of sexual harassment and assault is

allowed, normalized, excused and even tolerated. Leaders in the military should lead by example. There is a lack of adequate training for military leadership. Leadership needs to learn about the problem, even examine their own behavior and change with the times. Leaders who engage in and/or tolerate sexual harassment and assault increase the risk under their command of being assaulted by a factor. This can be prevented and stopped if leadership can remove or reform the harassing commanders and train the good people to learn about the issue and teach those under their command about it. Leaders should encourage reporting and hold all commanders accountable, and those who fail should be removed from command.

In conclusion, sexual assault and harassment within the military represents a significant threat to performance degradation and military readiness, more so than our current war issues. It is of great importance to seek sustainable strategies that are needed to end this silent war. Sexual harassment and assault jeopardizes the welfare of the army concerning readiness as well as mission accomplishment by weakening unit cohesion. The Army is in need of culture change, where every Soldier is treated with dignity and respect, where all allegations of sexual harassment assault are treated with seriousness, the victims are protected, offenders are held by strong system of justice and commanders are accountable.

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