Men, Women, and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Military

PREVIOUSLY ANNOUNCED

In a 1995 U.S. Department of Defense survey of active-duty men and women in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard, 70.9 percent of female personnel and 35.8 percent of male personnel said that they had experienced sexually harassing behavior(s) in the previous 12 months. Furthermore, military personnel experiencing sexual harassment reported lower levels of overall job satisfaction and were more likely to report that they intend to leave the military.

Introduction

Sexual harassment in the workplace has increasingly become a matter of concern for employers and their employees. Reports of sexual harassment on the job are common among both public- and private-sector employees, with some estimates suggesting that as many as one in two women may experience sexual harassment at some point in their work lives. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that sexual harassment imposes substantial costs on workers and firms through increased job turnover, higher absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, lower productivity, and adverse health outcomes. The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB), for example, estimates that between 1992 and 1994 sexual harassment in Federal agencies cost the Federal Government $327 million (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB), 1995).

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In 1995, approximately 195,000 women—13 percent of the total force—were on active duty in the U.S. military. This represented a six-fold increase since 1973 when the all-volunteer force was established (Department of Defense News Briefing, July 2, 1996). Sexual harassment is likely to be a particularly acute issue for the U.S. military because of the intrinsic differences between military and civilian employment. Military personnel—particularly young enlisted men and women—frequently live on military bases and are on duty 24 hours a day. This high level of proximity and the blurring of professional and personal relationships may increase both the incidence and subsequent psychological costs of sexual harassment (Department of Defense News Briefing, July 2, 1996). To the extent that sexual harassment results in men and women choosing to end their military careers, the monetary costs of sexual harassment in the military are also likely to be substantial because of the relatively large amount of job-specific training involved in military jobs.

The U.S. military is not blind to the growing concern about sexual harassment. Several well-publicized events—for example, the Navy’s Tailhook Convention scandal and the Army’s Aberdeen Proving Ground incident—and internal reports have served to heighten awareness of the issue (Towell, 1997). The military has responded by becoming the first large organization to implement sexual harassment prevention programs and it continues to be a model for both private and public sector employers (O'Donohue, 1997).

This article examines the relationship between sexual harassment and the job satisfaction of active-duty men and women in the U.S. Armed Forces. It first documents the extent of sexual harassment in the military and then focuses on how those individuals reporting sexual harassment differ from those who did not. Detailed information about the circumstances—in particular, location, characteristics of the harasser, etc.—surrounding specific incidents of sexual harassment shed light on the qualitative nature of sexual harassment in the military. Finally, the relationship between sexual harassment and overall job satisfaction and intentions to remain in the military is assessed.

The Data

The data come from the 1995 Status of the Armed Forces Surveys: Form B—Gender Issues conducted by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and generalize to men and women in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard with at least six months of active-duty service who were not flag rank officers. Non-proportional, stratified random sampling was used to ensure that there were adequate numbers of women and minorities available for analysis. Questionnaires