

Military men more distressed by sexual harassment than military women, research finds

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Military men who are targets of frightening and threatening sexual harassment may experience more distress and work performance problems than military women who face the same treatment, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

A total of 52 percent of [military](#) women said they had been sexually harassed compared with 19 percent of [military men](#), and women more frequently reported they were very frightened by the experience than their male colleagues, according to a study published online in APA's *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. "The surprise was that men were more upset and debilitated after experiencing frightening [sexual harassment](#) than women," said lead author Isis H. Settles, PhD, of Michigan State University.

"Men may be less likely to think they'll be sexually harassed, so it's a particularly strong violation of their expectations and that could result in stronger negative reactions," Settles said. "Another possibility is that men feel less able to cope with their sexual harassment than women, who know it's a possibility and therefore are perhaps more emotionally prepared."

Researchers examined data from a 2002 Department of Defense survey of 17,874 service members, of whom 9,098 were men. A total of 6,304 male and female soldiers reported experiencing sexual harassment while

on duty in the past year. Of those, 28 percent were men, 64.5 percent were white, 21.5 percent were African-American and 14 percent were Hispanic.

To differentiate between frightening and less serious harassment, the survey asked participants to recall one incident during the past 12 months that had the greatest effect on them and to rate the experience from being "not at all frightening and threatening" to "extremely frightening and threatening."

"Individuals were free to define how harassment made them feel. As such, frightening or threatening harassment could include experiences that were menacing, threatened their sense of job security, or were those they believed could escalate to an assault," said Settles.

Male soldiers reported that men were the perpetrators 52 percent of the time, while the other incidents involved both a man and a woman or a woman alone. For women, 86 percent of the harassment was by men, while the remaining incidents involved both men and women or only a woman. While soldiers of both genders reported more distress if sexually harassed by a higher ranking soldier, women reported more fear than men when their harasser was higher ranking. A total of 46 percent of men and 68 percent of women were sexually harassed by someone of higher rank.

The researchers assessed victims' level of distress, role limitations and work satisfaction based on their responses to survey questions. For example, to determine role limitations, participants indicated how often in the past four weeks they had difficulty doing their work or other daily activities as a result of physical or emotional problems.

Since the military is male-dominated and adheres to hierarchical, hyper-masculine cultural norms, more research is needed to determine whether

the same results occur for men outside of a military context, the authors said.

"Overall, the findings illustrate the negative impact that sexual harassment has for both [women](#) and men, emphasizing the importance of organizations like the U.S. military to continue working to reduce its prevalence," Settles said.

More information: "Sex Differences in Outcomes and Harasser Characteristics Associated With Frightening Sexual Harassment Appraisals," Isis H. Settles, PhD, NiCole T. Buchanan, PhD, Stevie C. Y. Yap, MA, and Zaje A. T. Harrell, PhD, Michigan State University, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, online March 2014.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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