

# **Military Sexual Misconduct and Military Sexual Trauma: From concepts and constructs to context and culture**

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# Acknowledging those who've come before us



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# Sexual Violence

*No one deserves to work and live - free from sexual violence – more than those individuals who have chosen to serve their country.*



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*“If the frogs in a pond started behaving strangely, our first reaction would not be to punish them or even to treat them. Instinctively, we’d wonder what was going on in the pond.”*



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# Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

- **Gender-based violence (GBV)**
  - Any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will, and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females.
  - Violence that is directed at an individual based on his or her biological sex OR gender identity.
    - Includes:
      - Physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse, threats, coercion, and economic or educational deprivation, whether occurring in public or private life.



# Sexual Violence

“Because sexual harassment and sexual assault are more closely intertwined in the military than in most civilian contexts, it’s important to understand the complex interplay between sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military”.

(Stander & Thomsen, Military Medicine, 2016)



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# Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault

- Military environment: Overlap of SH and SA is much greater than in most civilian contexts;
  - Broad boundaries; at the extreme, workspace and life space merge completely during an operational deployment.



# Military “Culture”

- Military environment includes a broad and diverse range of “sub-cultures” that vary by branch, active duty vs. reserve, etc.



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# MST Misconduct & Military Sexual Trauma

- Comprehensive transformation of organizational culture to decrease/eliminate incidents
  - Comprehensive supports for those who report and disclose incidents of sexual violence
    - Organizational response can mitigate trauma or exacerbate the trauma (secondary trauma)
- 
- Full continuum of specialized services and supports
    - For still-serving members and Veterans



## Potential Service Offence



# US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

“Because similar clinical considerations are relevant for victims of both severe harassment and sexual assault, most VA research has assessed both types of victimization together as part of a broader category labeled military sexual trauma (MST), defined as:



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# US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

“Psychological trauma, which in the judgment of a mental health professional employed by the Department, resulted from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the Veteran was serving on active duty or active duty for training.”



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# Lessons from Workplace Sexual Harassment

- Left unchecked, SH in the workplace has the potential to escalate to violent behaviour.
- Employers that do not take preventative steps to prevent face major implications:
  - Decreased productivity
  - Low morale and increased absenteeism
  - Health care costs/potential legal expenses.





# Ontario Human Rights Commission (cont'd)

- Sexual harassment occurs across occupations and industry sectors: it may be more common in certain types of employment, including:
  - . Male-dominated work environments (military, policing, construction work)
  - . Jobs that are thought to be “subservient” (nursing, massage therapy, waitressing, sex trade)
  - . Work done in isolation (live-in caregivers)



# Preventing and Responding to Sexual Harassment

Labour legislation across Canada deals with employers having to create safe workplaces free of toxicity and otherwise...



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# Preventing and Responding to Sexual Harassment

Has the employer met its obligation?

- ✓ Procedures in place at the time to deal with discrimination and harassment
- ✓ How quickly the organization responded to the complaint
- ✓ How seriously the complaint was treated
- ✓ The resources made available to deal with the complaint
- ✓ If the organization provided a healthy environment for the person who complained
- ✓ How well the person who complained was told about the action taken.



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# Systemic Inequalities & Workplace Culture:

- While acknowledging the importance of individual complaints processes, this focus fails to address systemic context of sexual harassment
- Focus on individual complaints tends to reinforce the idea that SH is predominantly one of aberrant individual wrongdoing

( Sheppard, 1995 Canadian Lab & Emp)



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# Systemic Inequalities & Workplace Culture:

“More proactive and systemic approach to sexual harassment requires an understanding of how **domination** is embedded within organizational structures, practices, and work cultures”

( Sheppard, 1995 Canadian Lab & Emp)



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# Sexual Harassment & Military Sexual Assault

Military emphasis on group cohesion and loyalty,  
Encourages a culture of bystander innocence /  
ambivalence

- Bystander Intervention Model Goals:
  - Educate on the problem of sexual violence in the military and how to recognize signs
  - Explicit training on gender hostility and sexual harassment
  - Encourage everyone to be part of the solution –  
“See something, say something”



# Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault in Military

- Hierarchical structure may increase risk for victimization based on abuse of authority:
  - Hierarchy gives military **leaders** the **ability/responsibility** to change policy and practice
  - To improve programs & environment much more dramatically and quickly than would be possible in most civilian environments.
- Greater “**opportunity**” - greater “**obligation**”



# Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault in Military

- The high value placed on cohesion throughout the force may lead to protectionism and make it difficult for victims to come forward; on the other hand, group loyalty may make prevention efforts more successful when leveraged through the **bystander intervention approach**.
- Incentives - positive and negative (promotions, rewards, reprisals, sanctions, etc.) need to reflect this approach



# The Time Is Now!!

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It matters what leaders do or don't do

“The culture of any organization is shaped by the worst behavior the leader is willing to tolerate.”

Gruenter and Whitaker



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**Thank you for your participation in this symposium. We all owe a debt of gratitude for the tireless efforts of the many soldiers and Veterans who have experienced this first hand and for their commitment, advocacy, and insistence on accountability, action, and meaningful change.**



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