

What's needed to boot GBV out of the military

Transformation in how SANDF personnel are socialised into becoming soldiers will happen when women and men assertively reject the expected mimicry of masculinity

COMMENT
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Institutional gender-based violence in the military continues to pose a risk not only to women in uniform, but anywhere members of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) are deployed.

Despite awareness campaigns, policies and regulations to address this, incidents of gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual exploitation continue to rise.

The ministerial task team report on sexual harassment, sexual abuse and sexual offences in the department of defence highlights some of the reasons, failures and measures to address this scourge. Although this is now receiving the attention it deserves, the military needs to undergo a cultural transformation to address GBV.

As Erika Gibson pointed out in her article in the *Mail & Guardian* last week, "a culture of sexual violence" has taken hold.

Military cultures are embedded in the military hierarchy, which engenders a culture of cohesion, compliance and subordination. This serves as a deterrent in reporting instances of sexual harassment and abuse for various reasons.

When women report incidences of sexual violence, they face situations where they are scorned or face social exclusion, which partly explains why sexual exploitation and abuse goes underreported. This then fuels a culture of impunity. Ignoring or underreporting instances of sexual abuse contributes to the persever-

ance of systematic aggression and violence against women.

Therefore, it is essential that the existing mechanisms of redress function effectively. But, as the ministerial task team report highlights, mechanisms of redress are deficient.

Overall, women lack faith in the existing mechanisms to address sexual misconduct, including the military leadership, leading to a reluctance to report such issues.

An informal code of silence exists where sexual harassment is seen as part of everyday culture. Women in the military typically do not want to cause "gender trouble", or be viewed as victims who need protection.

Added to this, my research over the years has shown that gendered norms of masculinity, associated with strength, violence, aggression and the sexual objectification and denigration of women, fuels gender stereotypes and discrimination. For example, physically their comparative lack of strength and endurance is seen as a liability. Psychologically and emotionally, women are seen as less wired for war.

Besides this, men (and some women) perceive women as a gendered security risk, by not only weakening the capacity of sections and platoons, but making them more vulnerable to attack.

Such discourses that define women as weak and physically vulnerable, incapable of protecting themselves, erodes women's agency and keeps women "in their place".

Managing gender integration in the military today is not just about equality, but about understanding the added value women bring to the



On parade: Women may stylise their behaviour to mould into a masculine image of a soldier to find acceptance, but this must change if the military means to tackle sexual abuse in its ranks. Photo: Kay Nietveld/Getty Images

military, which can improve military effectiveness and decision-making. This is compromised where military culture expects them to assimilate masculine norms and values to be viewed as a competent soldier.

Expecting women merely to fit into the masculine organisation and exchange major aspects of their gender identity, without men having to do likewise, maintains the gender gap. This entails not only embracing diversity, but dismantling those structures, practices and cultures that disempower women. At the heart of this is not only the privileging of masculinities, but the negative effects of sexism and patriarchy.

In highly patriarchal societies such as South Africa, these continue to define and influence gender relations in the military. Gender mainstreaming, which is the transformation of gender norms in the military, remains elusive. Typically, where women threaten the power relations of men, this evokes different forms of resistance and discrimination. In everyday life, women in

the SANDF report how they experience their leadership or authority affected by increased scrutiny, sabotage, sexual harassment, social isolation and exclusion.

Sexism remains rife and women experience various forms of sexual harassment, which has a negative effect on their morale and careers.

While great strides have been made in improving the number of women serving in the military, the ultimate goal of gender mainstreaming, which is the transformation of gender norms in the military, remains elusive. The increased presence of women has not translated into processes that tackle gendered inequalities and contribute to the transformation of the military. Women continue to come up against a barrage of challenges that prohibit them from infusing alternative values into military culture.

The only way to challenge this is for women to adopt a more assertive stance in order to influence organisational practices and decision-making. However, few are prepared to adopt this risky strategy as it may result in their effective segregation, either imposed from the outside or self-induced.

Few women in the SANDF have been willing to take on this position. The easier option has been to "perform" and stylise their behaviour in accordance with the identity practices of the masculine image of the (combat) soldier.

Orna Sasson-Levy (2003) summa-

rises this aptly when she says that women in the military typically have to "shape their gender identities according to the hegemonic masculinity of the combat soldier through three interrelated practices: the mimicry of combat soldiers' bodily and discursive practices; the need to distance themselves from traditional femininity; and to trivialise sexual harassment".

This hinders the displacement of gendered dichotomies necessary to bring about a transformative change in the manner in which military personnel are socialised into becoming soldiers and in terms of the roles they are expected to perform today.

Although one does see a shifting of gender binaries as the performative act of being a soldier transcends sex and gender, this has not shifted the power dynamics sufficiently to bring about a transformation in gender relations.

As Cynthia Enloe points out "men are the military, women are in the military". Where masculinity continues to form the bedrock of military culture, gender inequality and women's subordination will persist, and so too sexual exploitation and abuse. Putting in place policies and practices to address may deter and address this, but not the culture that perpetuates it.

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