

The sexual harassment of female active-duty personnel: Effects on job satisfaction and intentions to remain in the military

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between sexual harassment and the job satisfaction and intended turnover of active-duty women in the US military. Using single-equation probit models, we find that experiencing a sexually harassing behavior is associated with reduced job satisfaction and heightened intentions to leave the military. However, bivariate probit results indicate that failing to control for individuals' unobserved, time-invariant characteristics leads single-equation estimates to be overstated. Similarly, controlling for women's views about whether they have been sexually harassed reduces the single-equation estimates of the effect of the harassing behavior itself on job satisfaction and intentions to leave the military.

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1. Introduction

In 1995, approximately 195,000 women (13 percent of the total force) were on active-duty in the US military. This represents a six-fold increase since 1973 when the all-volunteer force was established (DoD, 1996). Intrinsic differences between military and civilian employment make sexual harassment a particularly salient issue for the US military. Military personnel often live on bases and are on duty 24 h/day. This high degree of proximity can blur professional and personal relationships and may increase both the incidence and subsequent costs of sexual harassment (Department of Defense, DoD).² In particular, sexual harassment has been linked to a reduction in unit cohesion and combat readiness (Rosen and Martin, 1997), and some have predicted that in the future the military may find “the equal opportunity climate of its units is one of its primary criteria of mission effectiveness” (Knouse, 1991, p. 386).

Our objective is to examine the relationship between sexual harassment, job satisfaction and intended turnover of active-duty women in the Armed Forces. We begin by incorporating measures of unwanted gender-related behaviors into single-equation models of job satisfaction and intentions towards future military employment. This allows us to compare our results directly to those in the literature. This strategy, however, implicitly assumes that reports of sexually harassing behaviors are exogenous, which is unlikely. In particular, unobserved heterogeneity may influence reports of sexually harassing behaviors on the one hand and reported satisfaction with and intentions to remain in military employment on the other. We therefore adopt two alternative strategies for accounting for the role of unobserved characteristics. First, we specify a bivariate probit model that accounts for any correlation between the error terms in sexual harassment and job satisfaction equations. Second, we explicitly control for women’s views about whether they have in fact been sexually harassed.

Overall, 70.9 percent of active-duty women reported experiencing some type of sexually harassing behavior in the previous 12 months. Single-equation estimates indicate that sexually harassing behavior is associated with reduced job satisfaction and heightened intentions to leave the military. However, failing to control for individuals’ unobserved, time-invariant characteristics (such as personality) causes single-equation estimates to be overstated. Bivariate probit results indicate that sexually harassing behavior does not significantly increase dissatisfaction with military employment once the correlation in unobserved factors associated with reporting a sexually harassing behavior and job satisfaction are taken into account. Similarly, directly controlling for women’s views about whether they have been sexually harassed substantially reduces the estimated negative effect of the behavior itself on job satisfaction and indicates that there is, in general, no significant effect of sexually harassing behaviors on intentions to remain in military employment. Perceptions of harassment are driven by the unwanted, gender-related behaviors that women experience as well as by institutional arrangements (including the availability of training and formal complaint channels) in the workplace. Women who view their experiences as sexual harassment

² The US Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB), for example, estimates that between 1992 and 1994 sexual harassment cost the Federal Government US\$ 327 million (USMSPB, 1995). See Schneider et al. (1997) and Fitzgerald et al. (1997) regarding the incidence and consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace.

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