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The Continuum of Harm: Examining the Correlates of Sexual Assault Victimization

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Introduction

To continue to improve upon efforts to prevent and respond to sexual assault in the military, it is necessary to understand the factors that contribute to sexual assault. Over the years, a rich body of literature has been dedicated to this purpose, primarily with a focus on civilian populations (Tharp et al., 2013). These studies help guide our knowledge regarding sexual assault. However, there is reason to believe that the unique military context presents the potential for important differences (Sadler et al., 2003; Stander & Thomsen, 2016). These potential differences motivate the need to collect and analyze data specific to the military population regarding not only the prevalence of sexual assault but also the individual, social, organizational, or environmental factors associated with sexual assault. Identifying correlates of sexual assault can offer leaders important clues as to where to look to prevent unwanted behaviors and/or to respond to those that may have already occurred.

This executive note uses data from the 2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members (2018 WGRA)¹ to examine the *continuum of harm*; and, specifically, the relationship between sexual harassment, gender discrimination, unhealthy unit climates, and sexual assault victimization.

Key Takeaway.

• Greater attention to unhealthy unit climates, and particularly those tolerant of sexual harassment or where sexual harassment has occurred, may substantially improve sexual assault prevention and response systems.

Background

In 2018, the estimated rate of prior year sexual assault in the Department of Defense (DoD) was 6.2% for women and 0.7% for men. The estimate for women reflected a significant increase from 2016 when the prevalence rate for women was an estimated 4.3%. The highest estimated rates of sexual assault for women were among the most junior Service members. More specifically, among women Service members in the paygrade of E1 to E4, an estimated 9.1% experienced a sexual assault in the prior 12 months. However, increases in the rate of sexual assault were not limited to junior Service members. Rates in 2018 were also higher than 2016 for senior enlisted women, junior officer women, racial and ethnic minority women, white non-Hispanic women, women with no college and with four-

¹ For full results see the *2018 WGRA Overview Report* (Breslin et al., 2019) available here: https://dhra.deps.mil/sites/OPA/opa-survey/ layouts/15/start.aspx#/Gender%20Relations%20Surveys/Forms/AllItems.aspx.

year college degrees, single and married women, and lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) and non-LGB women.

The increase in sexual assault rates in 2018 highlighted the need for continued emphasis by the DoD and military Services on both sexual assault prevention and response. Data collected in the 2018 WGRA may provide specific clues and insights as to where leaders should focus to enhance their prevention and response efforts. Prior research demonstrates a relationship between sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination (Grifka et al., 2017; Harned et al., 2002; Stander et al., 2018). Evidence regarding the timeline of these behaviors is unclear, specifically whether sexual harassment necessarily precedes or happens alongside sexual assault (Stander & Thomsen 2016). However, there is reason to believe that these behaviors are strongly correlated, because environments that are conducive to sexual harassment are also environments where perpetrators of sexual assault may best operate undetected and without consequence. Characterized as the continuum of harm,² the expectation is that by increasing attention to lesser unwanted behaviors (e.g. sexual harassment) the DoD can reduce the prevalence of those behaviors as well as the prevalence of sexual assault.

Methods

This executive note uses data from the 2018 WGRA to examine the continuum of harm for women and men in the DoD's active component (Figure 1).

We conduct the analysis by focusing on three specific research questions.

- 1) What is the relationship between sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and sexual assault?
- 2) What is the relationship between workplace climate and sexual assault?
- 3) Among these factors—sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and the climate of the workplace—which are the most highly associated with sexual assault?



In all cases, the analyses focus on variables measuring experiences in the prior year (e.g., prior year sexual assault and prior year sexual harassment). Statistical comparisons are made using a chi square or adjusted Wald test. Bivariate comparisons and multivariate logistic regressions are done separately for women and men in order to distinguish between their different experiences with unwanted gender

² The continuum of harm refers to "inappropriate actions, such as sexist jokes, hazing, cyber bullying, that are used before or after the assault and/or supports an environment which tolerates these actions" (Department of Defense, 2014).

related behaviors in the military. All analyses account for the survey's complex weighting scheme³ such that the results are generalizable to the full active component population. What follows are the results for the DoD. Appendix A includes a replication of the results by military Service.

Results

Research Question #1: What is the relationship between sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and sexual assault?

In 2018, an estimated one out of five women (20.0%) and one out of twelve men (8.4%) who experienced sexual harassment in the prior year also experienced sexual assault (Table 1). Likewise, one out of seven women (15.2%) and one out of 14 men (7.1%) who experienced gender discrimination in the prior year also experienced sexual assault. The rate of sexual assault among those who experienced sexual harassment or gender discrimination was significantly higher than among those who did not.

Table 1
Sexual Assault Estimates for Women and Men who Experienced Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination in the Prior Year

	Sexual Assa	Sexual Assault Estimates for Women			Sexual Assault Estimates for Men		
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	
	Behavior	Did Not Experience Behavior		Behavior	Did Not Experience Behavior	Odds Ratio	
Sexual Harassment	20.0%	1.8%	12.1	8.4%	0.2%	42.0	
Gender Discrimination	15.2%	4.5%	3.9	7.1%	0.6%	12.1	

Note: Odds ratios (columns c and f) reflect the odds that the outcome (sexual assault victimization) will occur. An odds ratio less than one means a lower odds of sexual assault victimization, an odds ratio that is equal to one means that there is no relationship to sexual assault victimization, and an odds ratio that is greater than one means a higher odds of sexual assault victimization. Control variables include race/ethnicity, relationship status, Service, Paygrade, and deployment status. All differences are significant at p < .001.

A multivariate logistic regression, controlling for Service, paygrade, and deployment experience in the prior year, also revealed sizable differences in sexual assault victimization between those who experienced other unwanted behaviors and those who did not (Table 1, column c and f). All else constant, women who experienced sexual harassment in the prior year were 12 times more likely to experience sexual assault compared to women who did not experience sexual harassment. Women

³ OPA scientifically weights the survey data so that findings can be generalized to the full population of active duty members. Within this process, statistical adjustments are made so that the sample more accurately reflects the characteristics of the population from which it was drawn. This ensures that the oversampling within any one subgroup does not result in overrepresentation in the total force estimates, and also properly adjusts to account for survey nonresponse. For a full discussion of the *2018 WGRA* sampling and weighting strategy see the *2018 WGRA Statistical Methodology Report* (OPA, 2019).

who experienced gender discrimination were four times more likely to experience sexual assault compared to women who did not experience gender discrimination. Likewise, men who experienced sexual harassment in the prior year were 42 times more likely to experience sexual assault compared to men who did not experience sexual harassment. Men who experienced gender discrimination in the prior year were 12 times more likely to experience sexual assault compared to men who did not experience gender discrimination.

Research Question #2: What is the relationship between workplace climate and sexual assault?

The 2018 WGRA included several items related to Service member's perceptions of their workplace climate. Service members were asked to assess the level of workplace hostility they experienced from their coworkers or immediate supervisor, the extent of respect and cohesion displayed by members of their unit, and the sense of responsibility for intervening to prevent and respond to sexual harassment or sexual assault they witnessed within their unit. Table two summarizes each of the workplace climate variables included in the continuum of harm analyses. To simplify interpretation, each climate factor was recoded from a continuous (from 1 to 5) to a binary variable (0 or 1) where a value of zero identifies a healthy workplace climate and a value of one identifies an unhealthy workplace climate. Overall, 5.7% of DoD Service members identified their workplace climate as unhealthy in terms of the extent of hostility they experienced in the prior year (e.g., someone interfered with their work performance, did not provide information or assistance when needed, or was excessively harsh in their criticism of their performance). Meanwhile, more than one in ten Service members identified their workplace climate as unhealthy in terms of respect and cohesion (13.6%) and responsibility and intervention (10.3%).

Table three summarizes how workplace climate relates to sexual assault victimization (see Appendix B for the specific survey questions). Among Service members who experienced workplace hostility in the prior year, 12.6% of women and 3.0% of men experienced sexual assault. Among those Service members who characterized their workplace climate as unhealthy in terms of respect and cohesion, 9.0% of women and 2.0% of men experienced sexual assault. Finally, among those Service members who characterized their workplace climate as unhealthy in terms of responsibility and intervention, 11.3% of women and 2.4% of men experienced sexual assault. For all three climate variables, women and men who experienced unhealthy climates were significantly more likely to experience sexual assault than military members serving in healthy climates.

Table 2
Workplace Climate Variables

Workplace Variable (Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistic)	Question Wording & Sample Items	Coding	Proportion of DoD Service members Reporting an Unhealthy Level
Workplace Hostility— Coworkers $(\alpha = 0.91)$	Q185-Q186: How often have you experienced any of the following behaviors, where your military [coworkers] [immediate	Moderate-to-high scores (3-5) coded as unhealthy	5.7%
Workplace Hostility— Immediate Supervisor $(\alpha = 0.93)$	supervisor] - Used insults, sarcasm, or gestures to humiliate you? - Gossiped/talked about you?		4.2%
Workplace Hostility— Overall $(\alpha = 0.94)$			3.9%
Respect & Cohesion $(\alpha = 0.96)$	Q202: How would you rate the climate in your unit regarding - Unit cohesion? - Respect from the chain of command? - Respect for the chain of command?	Low scores (1-2.99) coded as unhealthy	13.6%
Responsibility & Intervention $(\alpha = 0.94)$	Q184: In the past 12 months, to what extent have you witnessed people in your unit - Make it clear that sexual assault has no place in the military? - Promoting a unit climate based on mutual respect and trust?	` /	10.4%

A multivariate logistic regression, controlling for Service, paygrade, and deployment experience in the prior year, once again revealed sizable differences in sexual assault victimization between those military members serving in unhealthy versus healthy climates (Table 3, column c and f). All else constant, women serving in unhealthy climates—in terms of hostility, respect and cohesion, or

⁴ The multivariate and dominance analyses focus on workplace hostility from coworkers in lieu of the measure for workplace hostility from the immediate supervisor or the combined measure of workplace hostility overall.

responsibility and intervention—were up to three times more likely to experience sexual assault in the prior year compared to women serving in healthy climates (column c). The differences were even starker for men, with those serving in unhealthy workplace climates up to six times more likely to experience sexual assault in the prior year (column f).

Table 3
Sexual Assault Estimates for Women and Men in Healthy and Unhealthy Workplaces

	Sexual Assa	ult Estimates	for Women	Sexual As	for Men	
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
	Unhealthy Level	Healthy Level		Unhealthy Level	Healthy Level	Odds Ratio
Workplace Hostility Coworkers	12.6%	4.3%	2.8	3.0%	0.4%	6.0
Respect & Cohesion	9.0%	3.7%	2.4	2.0%	0.3%	5.8
Responsibility & Intervention	11.3%	3.9%	2.9	2.4%	0.4%	5.7

Note: Odds ratios (columns c and f) reflect the odds that the outcome (sexual assault victimization) will occur. An odds ratio less than one means a lower odds of sexual assault victimization, an odds ratio that is equal to one means that there is no relationship to sexual assault victimization, and an odds ratio that is greater than one means a higher odds of sexual assault victimization. Control variables include race/ethnicity, relationship status, Service, Paygrade, and deployment status. All differences are significant at p < .001.

Research Question #3: Among these factors—sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and the climate of the workplace—which are the most important for predicting sexual assault?

While sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and workplace climate are all significantly associated with sexual assault victimization, it may be useful for leaders to understand which of these factors contributes most to the odds of experiencing sexual assault. A dominance analysis (Luchman, 2015) examines the relative importance of each variable to the outcome of interest—sexual assault victimization. Table four presents the results of this analysis for women and men separately. However, the results are largely consistent. Overall, prior year sexual harassment experiences are by far the most important for predicting the odds of experiencing sexual assault in the prior year for both women and men. For women, the remaining variables each contribute roughly the same to the overall variance as seen by a standardized dominance statistic equivalent to 0.07 for gender discrimination, workplace hostility, and respect and cohesion, and standardized dominance statistic equal to 0.06 for responsibility and intervention. Notably, prior year experiences of gender discrimination was a prominent factor for men and workplace hostility ranked third for both women and men. The importance of workplace hostility is notable given that it is the only construct considered here that is not narrowly focused on gender-relations but more broadly on how Service members interact with and treat each other within the unit.

Table 4

Results of Dominance Analyses Examining the Relative Importance of Workplace Factors in Predicting Sexual Assault

	Women		Men		
	Standardized Dominance Statistic	Rank	Standardized Dominance Statistic	Rank	
Sexual Harassment	0.73	1	0.62	1	
Gender Discrimination	0.07	4	0.12	2	
Workplace Hostility coworkers	0.07	3	0.10	3	
Respect & Cohesion	0.06	5	0.09	4	
Responsibility & Intervention	0.07	2	0.08	5	

In summary, an examination of sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and workplace climate simultaneously reveals that sexual harassment was the most important of these factors for predicting sexual assault victimization. These results provide empirical support for what is a rather intuitive assertion. A robust prevention and response system must place emphasis on unhealthy command climates in order to address sexual assault but with particular attention to climates tolerant of sexual harassment or in which sexual harassment has occurred.

Discussion & Conclusion

In summary, and consistent with prior research, sexual harassment and gender discrimination appear to be strongly associated with sexual assault victimization in the Active component. Both women and men who experienced these unwanted gender-related behaviors in the prior year were significantly more likely to also experience sexual assault during the same time period. While we cannot state whether the sexual harassment or gender discrimination behaviors necessarily preceded the sexual assault, their strong association points to the importance of focusing on the prevention and response to all of these issues rather than treating them as distinct.

As with sexual harassment and gender discrimination, workplace climate appears to be strongly associated with sexual assault victimization in the Active component. For both women and men, unhealthy workplace climates were associated with significantly higher odds of sexual assault victimization after controlling for Service, paygrade, and deployment status. It is possible that the relationship between these climate variables and sexual assault works in either direction. In other words, unhealthy climates may contribute to the risk of sexual assault or a sexual assault experience may lead Service members to rate their units more poorly. However, the association between climate and sexual assault is important nonetheless. By providing greater attention to units with unhealthy climates, leaders may not only prevent future sexual assault but also identify where additional support and resources may be needed or beneficial for existing victims.

Continuum of Harm

An examination of sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and workplace climate simultaneously reveals that sexual harassment was the most factor most highly associated with sexual assault victimization. These results provide empirical support for what is a rather intuitive assertion. A robust prevention and response system must place emphasis on unhealthy command climates in order to address sexual assault but with particular attention to climates tolerant of sexual harassment or in which sexual harassment has occurred.

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Appendix A

Presentation of Results by Service

Table 5
Sexual Assault Estimates for Women and Men who Experienced Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination in the Prior Year by Service

		Sexual Assau	Sexual Assault Estimates for Women Sexual Assault Estimates for M				
		(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
		Experienced Behavior	Did Not Experience Behavior	Odds Ratio	Experienced Behavior	Did Not Experience Behavior	Odds Ratio
	Sexual Harassment	19.8%	1.4%	16.0	8.8%	0.2%	60.3
Army	Gender Discrimination	13.7%	4.1%	3.8	7.3%	0.5%	15.5
	Sexual Harassment	19.3%	2.1%	9.8	8.1%	0.2%	32.8
Navy	Gender Discrimination	15.4%	5.7%	3.1	6.4%	0.8%	7.3
Marine	Sexual Harassment	26.7%	3.3%	11.0	10.2%	0.2%	42.0
Corps	Gender Discrimination	23.1%	7.4%	4.4	10.8%	0.6%	19.2
	Sexual Harassment	18.2%	1.8%	11.7	6.7%	0.2%	30.2
Air Force	Gender Discrimination	13.5%	3.3%	5.2	5.5%	0.4%	15.2

Note: Odds ratios (columns c and f) reflect the odds that the outcome (sexual assault victimization) will occur. An odds ratio less than one means a lower odds of sexual assault victimization, an odds ratio that is equal to one means that there is no relationship to sexual assault victimization, and an odds ratio that is greater than one means a higher odds of sexual assault victimization. Control variables include race/ethnicity, relationship status, Paygrade, and deployment status. All differences are significant at p < .001.

Table 6
Sexual Assault Estimates for Women and Men in Healthy and Unhealthy Workplaces

		Sexual A	Assault Est Women	imates for	Sexual As	ssault Estima	ites for Men
		(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
		Unhealthy Level	Healthy Level	Odds Ratio	Unhealthy Level	Healthy Level	Odds Ratio
	Workplace Hostility- -Coworkers	11.7%	3.8%	3.3	3.4%	0.4%	7.9
Army	Respect & Cohesion	6.8%	3.5%	1.9	2.0%	0.4%	5.7
	Responsibility & Intervention	9.0%	3.5%	2.5	2.0%	0.4%	5.1
	Workplace Hostility- -Coworkers	11.7%	5.5%	2.0	2.4%	0.6%	3.5
Navy	Respect & Cohesion	10.7%	4.7%	2.3	2.2%	0.4%	4.9
	Responsibility & Intervention	14.4%	4.6%	3.1	2.9%	0.6%	4.8
	Workplace Hostility- -Coworkers	21.8%	7.0%	3.3	2.9%	0.4%	6.3
Marine Corps	Respect & Cohesion	15.8%	5.5%	3.1	1.9%	0.3%	5.8
	Responsibility & Intervention	20.8%	6.6%	3.5	3.1%	0.4%	7.7
	Workplace Hostility- -Coworkers	11.6%	3.2%	3.9	3.0%	0.3%	8.7
Air Force	Respect & Cohesion	7.1%	2.8%	2.8	2.0%	0.3%	7.6
	Responsibility & Intervention	7.8%	3.0%	2.7	2.1%	0.3%	7.8

Note: Odds ratios (columns c and f) reflect the odds that the outcome (sexual assault victimization) will occur. An odds ratio less than one means a lower odds of sexual assault victimization, an odds ratio that is equal to one means that there is no relationship to sexual assault victimization, and an odds ratio that is greater than one means a higher odds of sexual assault victimization. Control variables include Service, Paygrade, and deployment status. All differences are significant at p < .01.

Table 7

Results of Dominance Analyses Examining the Relative Importance of Workplace Factors in Predicting Sexual Assault, Army

	Women		Men		
	Standardized Dominance Statistic	Rank	Standardized Dominance Statistic	Rank	
Sexual Harassment	0.81	1	0.61	1	
Gender Discrimination	0.05	3	0.19	2	
Workplace Hostility coworkers	0.04	5	0.09	3	
Respect & Cohesion	0.06	2	0.06	4	
Responsibility & Intervention	0.05	4	0.05	5	

Table 8

Results of Dominance Analyses Examining the Relative Importance of Workplace Factors in Predicting Sexual Assault, Navy

	Women		Men	
	Standardized Dominance Statistic	Rank	Standardized Dominance Statistic	Rank
Sexual Harassment	0.73	1	0.67	1
Gender Discrimination	0.05	5	0.04	5
Workplace Hostility coworkers	0.06	4	0.06	4
Respect & Cohesion	0.09	2	0.11	3
Responsibility & Intervention	0.07	3	0.12	2

Table 9

Results of Dominance Analyses Examining the Relative Importance of Workplace Factors in Predicting Sexual Assault, Marine Corps

	Women		Men	
	Standardized Dominance Statistic	Rank	Standardized Dominance Statistic	Rank
Sexual Harassment	0.54	1	0.53	1
Gender Discrimination	0.13	3	0.15	3
Workplace Hostility coworkers	0.13	2	0.18	2
Respect & Cohesion	0.12	4	0.07	4
Responsibility & Intervention	0.09	5	0.06	5

Table 10

Results of Dominance Analyses Examining the Relative Importance of Workplace Factors in Predicting Sexual Assault, Air Force

	Women		Men	
	Standardized Dominance Statistic	Rank	Standardized Dominance Statistic	Rank
Sexual Harassment	0.73	1	0.55	1
Gender Discrimination	0.08	3	0.07	5
Workplace Hostility coworkers	0.08	2	0.12	3
Respect & Cohesion	0.06	4	0.08	4
Responsibility & Intervention	0.05	5	0.18	2

Appendix B

Workplace Climate Questions

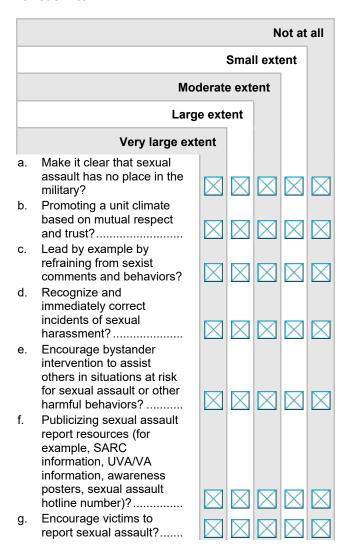
Workplace Hostility, Q185 & Q186 (Q186 replaces "coworkers" with "immediate supervisor")

During the past 12 months, how often have you experienced any of the following behaviors, where your coworkers... *Mark one answer for each item*.

				Ve	ry of	ten
				Of	ten	
		Sor	netin	nes		
	Once	or tw	ice			
	Ne	ever				
a.	Intentionally interfered with your work performance?		\times	\boxtimes	X	\boxtimes
b.	Did not provide information or assistance when you needed it?		X		\times	\boxtimes
C.	Were excessively harsh in their criticism of your work performance?		\times		X	
d.	Took credit for work or ideas that were yours?		X	\boxtimes	X	\boxtimes
e.	Gossiped/talked about you?		\times		X	\boxtimes
f.	Used insults, sarcasm, or gestures to humiliate you?		X		X	\boxtimes
g.	Yelled when they were angry with you?		X	\boxtimes	X	\boxtimes
h.	Swore at you in a hostile manner?		X	\boxtimes	X	\boxtimes
i.	Damaged or stole your property or equipment?		X	\boxtimes	X	X

Responsibility & Intervention, Q184

In the past 12 months, to what extent have you Witnessed people in your unit... *Mark one answer for each item*.



Respect & Cohesion, Q202

How would you rate the climate in your unit regarding... Mark one answer for each item.

					Po	oor
				F	air	
			Go	ood		
	,	Very go	od			
	Exce	ellent				
a.	Unit cohesion?	\times	\times	\boxtimes	\times	\times
b.	Respect <u>from</u> the chain of command?		X		\times	\boxtimes
C.	Respect <u>for</u> the chain of command?		X		X	\boxtimes
d.	Respect Service members have for others from diverse backgrounds?		X		\times	
e.	How women and men treat each other?		X		X	\boxtimes
f.	Providing help to one another when personal problems arise?		X	\boxtimes	\times	\boxtimes
g.	Dealing effectively with adversity or conflict when it occurs?		X		\times	
h.	Support for <u>male</u> victims of sexual assault?		\times	\boxtimes	\times	\boxtimes
i.	Support for <u>female</u> victims of sexual assault?		\times		\times	\boxtimes