

The Glorified Rapist

How Militarized Masculinity Creates Militarized Sites That Foster Intra-Service Sexualized Violence Through an Examination of the U.S. Military

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Abstract

The ratification of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 aimed to promote women's peace and security using a liberal feminist framework to advance gender equality in conflict settings. Its failure to redress underlying structural problems has raised justified criticism. This article probes to unpack the force of toxic hegemonic masculinity in conflict settings. The U.S. Army is highly regarded for safeguarding the nation-state. Yet, ironically, U.S. military institutions persist as sites of *intra*-service sexual violence which must not be understood as anything less than a national security concern. How militarized masculinities foster militarized sites and enable *intra*-service sexualized violence will be explored through a gendered lens using the U.S. military as a case study. Ultimately, this research finds that U.S. national heroes are being violated by uniformed rapists, who escape accountability shielded by militarism's toxic use of hegemonic masculinity.

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Those who commit sexual assault are not only committing a crime, they threaten the trust and discipline that make our military strong. That's why we have to be determined to stop those crimes, because they've got no place in the greatest military on Earth.

– U.S. President Barack Obama

Introduction & Essay Road Map

After numerous sexually violent incidences within the United States (U.S.) military, President Barack Obama voiced the quote above, and members of Congress were quick to pass legislation to redress the Pentagon's failed handling of this crisis. Active in all sectors, units, and divisions of the U.S. military is *intra-service* (service personnel against other service personnel) sexualized violence. Indeed, an armed male soldier violating his female comrades is not a daily concern for most Americans; yet, gender operates to penetrate all aspects of our lives including the very institution funded to secure the protection and futurity of the nation. This essay considers how militarized masculinities create militarized sites that enable *intra-service* sexualized violence through a case study of the U.S. military.

Following a quick remark regarding the limitations of this research, considerable space will be provided for conceptual and contextual grounding as this problem is theoretically rooted in disposition. Once complete, this essay will explore U.S. military institutions as sites for *intra-service* sexualized violence. This exploration will lead into a deeper analysis of how hegemonic masculinity sanctions grand-scale *intra-service* sexualized violence.

Limitations

Before moving on to the substance of this essay, it is fruitful to address the limitations of this work. Firstly, this work virtually ignores the experiences of those who are non-gender conforming and/or part of the LGBTQUI2S+ community, and by doing so, discounts their experiences of *intra*-service sexual violence in the U.S. military. Secondly, sexual violence is contextual; thus, this essay is far too short to claim to be an exhaustive account. Thirdly, *intra*-service sexual violence is not solely a result of hegemonic masculinity. However, this essay rigidly considers the role of masculinity, which may over promote *ungendering* the military as the ultimate means to eradicate this gross bodily violence. Lastly, the personal accounts and statistics used are likely inaccurate as sexual assault is traumatizing and underreported. *Intra*-service sexual assault is no exception considering the institutional power dynamics—and masculinities—at play.

Unpacking Hegemonic Masculinity in Militarized Institutions

This section aims to unpack hegemonic masculinity in militarized institutions to provide contextual and conceptual grounding (Connell 1987 and 1995; Cheng 1999; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). What follows sustains the notion that military institutions are structurally heteronormative and hegemonically masculine, making them difficult and harmful spaces for women and all who deviate from the alleged masculinist ideal (e.g., men with feminized statuses). The latter is appropriate to research as military institutions will remain as hegemonic masculine sites until gender issues—especially those concerning masculinities—are addressed and rectified.

On October 31, 2000, The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) ratified resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). The resolution bears a liberal feminist approach to peace and security as it: 1) demands increased representation of women

in decisions at all institutional levels regarding conflict, 2) mandates adequate protection of women in conflict, and 3) calls for the provisioning of security, justice services, and humanitarian aid. Despite the promise and significance of this resolution, it failed to mention men or masculinities which is extremely problematic because militarized institutions embody hegemonic masculinity. How can conditions be made better for women while gendered ideologies remain invisible, even in international policies? To this, feminist theorist Hannah Wright states that because gendered concepts have been assimilated into WPS policies, military institutions remain unchallenged and can normalize the workings of gendered ideologies to repress women. Susan Willett agrees with Wright, expounding, “gender discourse has been submerged by the dominant United Nations epistemology of hegemonic masculinity, militarism, and war.”

Criticism of UNSCR 1325 is not limited to feminist scholarly critique. Twenty years after its adoption, the Security Council stated UNSCR 1325 was deficient because most state actors have not fully enforced commitments, and initiatives to redress gendered violence in militarism largely remain small in scale (OECD 2020, p. 2). Therefore, although international recognition and law to safeguard women exists—especially in conflict settings—the Security Council NGO that ratified UNSCR 1325 concedes it is lacking and unsuccessful.

In 1982, Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell coined the term *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). It has since been used as an analytical instrument to study forces preventing women and non-heteronormative individuals from infiltrating sites of the public sphere. Essentially, hegemonic masculinity is a compilation of biological predispositions and socially-constructed gender norms that champion and privilege the masculine identity; it is not a homogenous fact for societal—or institutional—dominancy. In addition, hegemonic masculinity comprises heteronormativity, compelling masculine status men to discard femininity, queerness, and soft or weak attributes to assert their physical supremacy, which proliferates in capacities and professions monopolized by men and violence. Likewise,

militarism has been a site of masculinity since its inception, and the essentialist, hegemonic-masculine image of soldiers is a structural upshot of military institutions. The foundational role of militarism has created defence institutions that dominate over those who stray from the combatant masculine guise of a soldier. Although militarized institutions are not the only patriarchal structure that manifests toxic heteronormative masculinity, plenty of scholars have endeavoured to understand militarism's injurious use of gendered ideologies.

The sexual imagery of weapons is another factor to consider, as it is central to the image of militarism. The purpose is to exemplify how gender has diffused, creating connotations beyond the structure of military institutions. Thus, as proclaimed by Cohn, "both the military itself and the arms manufacturers are constantly exploiting the phallic imagery and promise of sexual domination that their weapons so conveniently suggest." Cohn expands upon this claim by considering advertisements such as that for the AV-8B Harrier II [ground attack aircraft]—"Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick." The phallic nature of militarized weapons is influential as this sexual imagery reveals linkages between military institutions/militarism and notions of hegemonic masculinity. Cohn's analysis indicates that the language of weaponized defence is phallic as it equips penis-like analogies. Along this train of thought, Henri Myrntinen (2003) highlights the irony behind the armed man as the protector of the powerless—often women and children—because it is more likely the armed male protector of the family will be the killer in domestic violence situations. Weapons are not necessarily a structural element of the military, signifying that military culture also needs reform beyond restructuring militarized institutions. However, if that is too large a task, this should at least confirm the need to study hegemonic masculinity—and all gendered ideologies—relative to militarism.

The ratification of UNSCR 1325, as stated above, aimed to promote women's peace and security through a liberal feminist approach by advancing gender equality in—for the most part—conflict settings. However, it relies on an *add-women-stir* framework (simply enlisting more women into the military to

increase women's representation to promote gender equality), and does not reference structural problems. Resolution 1325 is ill-suited to attend to domineering masculinities in military institutions and culture since the male gender is absent and not a unit of analysis. Women alone do not fully encapsulate gender. As stated by Sahana Dharmapuri, a gender analysis equips a sociocultural lens on power relations and can identify the unique priorities and abilities of men and women to promote peace and reconstruction efforts in the context of peace and security operations. The lack of gender awareness in UNSCR 1325 allows military institutions to remain toxic hegemonic masculine sites and to endorse the sexual phallic imagery of weapons. It is crucial that a gender analysis be conducted to accurately account for military institutions as sites that breed and tolerate *intra*-service sexualized violence of women personnel.

***Intra*-Service Sexualized Violence in Militarized Spaces**

Whether as proud patriots for their nation or seasoned soldiers, many highly regard militarists for exemplifying risk-taking, heroism and strength. Thus, it might be challenging to accept or grapple with the idea that military institutions foster sexualized violence, let alone *intra*-service. However, statistics confirm this reality at staggering rates. In the mid-1990s, a survey of 828 female veterans at the Baltimore Veterans Medical Center found that 41% reported rape, 55% experienced sexual abuse, and 27% revealed having undergone physical abuse, sexual abuse, and rape. Let it be noted that only six percent of servicewomen had attempted or completed a sexual assault complaint with the Department of Veterans Affairs in 1995. According to recent reports, sexual assault rates from the mid-1990s have increased. In 2018, 20,500 service members—13,000 women and 7,500 men—reported some form of rape or sexual assault. Sexual assaults in the 2018 fiscal year rose by almost 40% from those reported in 2016. Specific to women's experiences, there was a 50% increase from 2006; however, 76.1% of victims did not report their sexual assault(s) for various reasons, including distrust for the system, presumed dissatisfaction, and fear of retaliation. Finally,

between 2016 and 2020, 59% of cases in which women reported rape stated that the perpetrator was someone of higher rank, and 24% was committed by someone in their chain of command. Therefore, quantitative statistical data denotes that sexual violence is not merely a problem with militarism ideology, but seemingly an inherent epidemic within military institutions.

I note that rates of sexual assault increase more during wartime than in peacetime (15 percent of servicewomen in Iraq and Afghanistan reported sexual assault or harassment). According to the Committee of Veterans' Affairs, this is due to the "stress of war." Perhaps we should all start pulling stuff like that from our asses it seems so logical and persuasive! On a more analytical note, perhaps there is some truth in this statement considering the adoption of UNSCR 1325 by the international community. However, even if there is a causal relationship between wartime and rape, it does not confirm nor excuse the act as morally or lawfully justifiable. It leads one to question what variable is at work to silence (to be further expounded upon) *intra*-service sexual assault in the U.S. military?

Sexual violence is a grave problem within military institutions that endures because their hierarchal structures and long chains of command facilitate *intra*-service rape. Joanna Bourke (2021) interviewed a U.S. armed forces survivor that experienced sexual trauma by her outranked abuser while in uniform at her workplace. Despite telling him to stop during the act and telling her colleague of the incident (who replied: "Look, everyone knows he does this stuff."), no justice resulted. Instead, the abuser exercised power and control over the woman by spreading rumours and threatening poor evaluations if she spoke out, as he was above her in the chain of command.

The pathologization of the victim in this case, and in cases of *intra*-service rape more broadly, motivated me to elect this research endeavour. I am a cisgender woman who acknowledges that gender inequality exists, but I refuse to assume the trivializing of rape. After all, if male soldiers intrinsically represent the hegemonic masculinist ideal, they should have no problem having

consensual sex with their fellow female personnel without penetrating her in uniform. This act, which is so prominent in the U.S. military, is not a testament to the strength, risk-taking, or all that entails being a male soldier; it is pathetic, cowardly, and all that defines a rapist—at least in my *womanly* opinion.

Intra-service rape is reaching society's attention, including through various mediums in mass media production. For example, the award-winning and Academy Award-nominated documentary, *The Invisible War* (2012) showcased sexual assault in the U.S. military by interviewing female veterans who recount their incident(s) of abuse. HuffPost blogger Soraya Chemaly wrote soon after viewing the film in 2012, "Indeed, militarisms and sexual violence seem to go hand in hand—but we don't usually think of rape being *intramilitary*." Why is this the case? Could it be that society has socialized us into championing the military without giving it a second thought? It is fitting to question why the military—despite having a fiscal budget in 2022 of \$1.64 trillion (14.3% of the total U.S. federal budget)—remains a site of *intra*-service sexual violence. Are military institutions unaware of this reality or too engulfed in its entrenched manifestation of hegemonic masculinity?

Hegemonic masculinity in military institutions, as is clear from above, yields high rates of (violent) sexual assault, disproportionately targets female personnel, and makes it virtually impossible to render safe and fruitful paths to acquire justice for victims. Why is hegemonic masculinity so ideologically powerful and decisive large scale? Connell states it is because it represents the *power of reason* that constructs the interests of society at large (Shannon 2022, p. 73). With that, one can better conceive the rigorous strength and force of hegemonic masculinity's facilitation of *intra*-service rape. As such, to conclude this essay, I offer Eileen L. Zurbruggen's work and consideration of epistemological assumptions to bring this issue full circle.

Zurbruggen believes that a significant reason male soldiers commit rape against their female comrades lies with the hegemonic masculine socialization that underlines military institutions. In

exploring this empirical association, Zurbriggen examines sex and sexuality. For example, nonrelational sexuality—an element of hegemonic masculinity—demands men ascertain their manhood through regular impersonal sex with an array of women. Indeed, it does not imply that soldiers should rape their female comrades to prove their masculinity, but it instills nonetheless that sex is inherent to being a *real* man. When coupled with other hegemonic masculine socializations such as toughness, aggression, dominance, power, and control, one can see how the puzzle comes together. Thus contemporary *intra*-service rape is excused and promoted, and ultimately transpires all too often within the U.S. military and is perpetrated by nationally glorified heroes.

It can be contended that epistemological assumptions behind militarized masculinities furnish a rationale for *intra*-service military sexualized violence. For instance, in the construction of militarized masculinity, women must be eliminated, including from military institutions. A woman in the military is viewed as an innately violent threat to masculinity as she veers from femininity (De Dauw 2020 p. 71). Put differently, a male soldier's ability to protect a woman hinges on his capacity to annihilate her. This construction frames military masculinity as entirely masculine, disallowing the feminine in its spaces and bodies (73 and 76). Perhaps this may be a theoretical stretch—or more so, a jump—but could this ascribe motive for the high rates of *intra*-service sexual assault of female personnel by their male counterparts in U.S. military institutions? The possible motivation is up for interpretation, however it validates my opinion that sexualized violence is a militant tactic to eliminate women from military institutions while fueling masculine sexual desire and ascribing his dominion.

Conclusion

The U.S. Army stresses loyalty, selfless service, and personal courage; the Marine Corps pillars courage, honour, and commitment; and the Air Force emphasizes service before self, excellence, and integrity (O'Malley 2015, p. 4). Despite these

values, they serve to obfuscate and justify violence. U.S. military institutions stand as sites of *intra*-service sexual violence which cannot be understood as anything less than a national security concern. This essay explored how militarized masculinity endorses *intra*-service sexualized violence in the context of the U.S. military. After conceptually grounding ourselves, we shifted to unpack masculinity in militarized institutions, leading to a deeper analysis of *intra*-service sexual assault and its causal relationship with hegemonic masculinity. The nonsensical conviction of championing men that is core to U.S. military institutions must disband, as it has sanctioned the sexual abuse of the nation's heroes by its uniformed rapists. In closing, since its conception, the structural makeup of an institution designed to bring peace simultaneously breeds *intra*-service sexual violence. The U.S. Department of Defence can either continue to silence, repress, and discard its female soldiers or embark proactively to hold accountable the male soldiers who violate them.

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