**////Title: Gender Minimisation and Gender-based Abuse Experienced by Military Women**

**////Standfirst:**

While the psychological impact of warzone experiences on military personnel is well-documented, the unique gendered experiences of personnel are rarely discussed. Professor Lynne McCormack at the University of Newcastle, along with clinical psychologist Nicole L. Bennett, investigated the ‘lived’ experience of women in the military through a series of interviews with female veterans. Their findings shed light on profound and detrimental dehumanising behaviours directed at the women who participated in this study, which they describe as gender minimisation, a form of sexual abuse.

**////Main text:**

Life in the military can be incredibly stressful and life-altering, due to exposure to violent conflicts, death, and other traumatic events. As a result, many veterans are known to suffer from combat-related posttraumatic stress and other psychological conditions.

While combat-related posttraumatic stress – a potential precursor to posttraumatic stress disorder – is widely researched, some forms of military-related trauma that primarily impact women are not as well-known. Professor Lynne McCormack of the University of Newcastle and clinical psychologist Nicole L. Bennett recently explored life in the military for women.

Their study is the first to specifically identify and define *gender minimisation* as a negative gender bias that supports dehumanising behaviours toward a minority group within the workplace, such as women in the military.

Dehumanisation is commonly used as a military strategy toward an enemy. However, if allowed to flourish unchecked as gender-directed abuse in the workplace, it becomes a conduit for discrimination, sexual abuse, and sexual trauma. While sexual abuse in the military had previously been investigated by other research teams, gender minimisation of women in the military is still widely unexplored.

Therefore, if repetitive dehumanising of a minority group within a workplace is allowed to continue, it constitutes a form of abuse. Moreover, when carried out unconsciously and without restraint, it can lead to more overt sexual abuse, and allows the minimisation of such abuse.

To better understand how women in the military experience gender minimisation and sexual abuse, but also how these experiences can shape their life, McCormack and Bennett interviewed six women veterans between 25 and 46 years of age. All participants had been discharged from the army, navy, or air force within the past 10 years, after over 5 years of service.

The six veterans had been specifically deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, and East Timor. One of the participants was discharged from the army for medical reasons, while the others chose to leave.

During the interviews, the participants raised personal experiences of gender-based abuse while they served in the military, and how these events impacted their life both positively and negative. By recording the interviews, the researchers were able to examine them in depth to search for common themes, recurring patterns, and other salient information. Their analyses yielded very interesting results. In particular, they identified two recurring themes in the stories narrated by their study participants.

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The first theme was the reference to an overall immature culture within the military environment. More specifically, some of the women said that they had joined the military with a certain naivety and idealistic expectations.

Ultimately, however, they encountered a ‘toxic culture’, which made their healthy development into adulthood particularly challenging. This immature and toxic culture was marked by very few rules, juvenile behaviour, vindictive pranks, and the sexualisation of women.

Many of the interviewed veterans shared similar experiences of being shut down, silenced, or ignored due to their gender. Some also reported gender-specific name calling, being referred to as too sensitive, or being the subject of patriarchal derisions, such as being told that they must be ‘PMSing’ [pee-em-ess-ing] or that they only joined the army to receive financial support when starting a family.

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As a result of this overall juvenile and toxic environment, many of the women spoke of feeling vulnerable and unsafe. Many reported being touched or grabbed without their consent, while some even reported being raped by team members.

All interviewees also emphasised how difficult it is for women in the military to speak up and tell their superiors about abuse they experienced, as team members are rarely held accountable for it. Following episodes of harassment and sexual abuse, some of the participants reported masquerading as gay, losing interest in men, or even denying themselves any form of sexuality.

Some of the veterans also felt that the sexual oppression and disrespect they experienced in the military also ‘contaminated’ their female colleagues, either because they were keen to fit in or because they were silenced by other team members. Most of the interviewed veterans said that they had lost their authentic self, and their self-worth had significantly diminished during their years in the military.

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Initially, on leaving the military, the women felt powerless and isolated, and only somewhat empowered by the knowledge that for most, they had left voluntarily and were not discharged.

Their experiences of gender minimisation and abuse somehow appeared to increase their fear, dread, and paranoia, while also decreasing their faith in men. This made their integration back into society more challenging, as they often felt that they could not trust anybody in their lives and workplaces.

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The second recurring theme identified by the researchers was the participants’ perception that they had psychologically grown after leaving the military and had somewhat transcended the adversities they had experienced. Despite the adverse psychological consequences of their experiences, some of the women reported feeling free after leaving the military and empowered to navigate relationships on their own terms. Aligned with the processes and necessary cognitive struggle needed for posttrauma growth, they thus viewed their adverse military experiences as hurdles to transcend and move past, although not without intense self-exploration and difficulty.

Embracing experiences of empathy, flexibility, gratitude, love and care was a key step in their healing journey, as well as learning to value their strengths and unique traits again. The interviews were alive with reflective insight and during them, some women recalled stories of empowerment, for example, the positive aspects of their military experience such as climbing the ranks, which sometimes allowed them to rise above gender minimisation and abuse.

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The recent work by McCormack and Bennett offers new insight and accounts of the adverse experiences that women can experience in military settings. It also highlights some of the common patterns and trends perceived by these former military women in terms of their workplace environment and relations with their team members.

Finally, this recent study sheds light on how gender and sexual abuse in the military can detrimentally impact the lives of women during and after they are released from duty. The development of new projects, therapies and other interventions for women in the military need to acknowledge the likelihood of gender discriminatory biases in the military. Awareness training to eliminate gender minimisation and sexual abuse during service needs to be embedded in all levels of military life. For those impacted by gender minimisation and sexual abuse during service, recovery and growth support is imperative during their military careers and discharge.

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This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘Relentless, Aggressive, and Pervasive: Exploring Gender Minimization and Sexual Abuse Experienced by Women Ex-Military Veterans’, Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001157>

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