

Army's rotten sexism: a product of training killers

- 2 May 2011

New scandals have again exposed the extreme sexism in the Australian military. Jasmine Ali looks at whether promoting more women into combat roles will make any difference

Defence minister Stephen Smith has launched a flurry of investigations in the wake of new scandals exposing the rampant sexism within the Australian military.

Even the government seemed shocked by the failure of senior army officers and their attempt to cover-up this scandal. But this evidence is not new. There is a long-standing and ingrained culture of sexist and homophobic attitudes entrenched within the military.

Calls for reform were triggered when a female cadet at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) went public about how she was secretly filmed having sex with a colleague. The recording was watched, via Skype, by six other cadets.

The cadet went to the media after ADFA commanders tried to hush up the incident. They advised her that ADFA would not take the matter to the police, and had simply given the men involved a slap on the wrist by removing some leave entitlements. Astonishingly, the female cadet was told she would have to apologise to her fellow cadets for going to the media and front a hearing on separate disciplinary matters.

In the wake of the media exposure she was hounded and harassed by fellow cadets in a shocking example of blaming the victim of the abuse. Her apology to her cadet group was cancelled after cadets began abusing her as a "slut" when she appeared before the group. Further vilification followed, and she had her room plastered with shaving foam.

This scandal was followed by a flood of reports of sexual abuse dating as far back as the 1970s. ABC Radio aired a story of another female trainee in the academy who was brutally raped and then told by commanding officers to "suck it up".

It also emerged that the army failed to take any disciplinary action against serving personnel who joined a homophobic hate page set up on Facebook. The page encouraged physical attacks and death threats against individual gay men in the army over what it called their "filthy lifestyle decision".

Public exposure of the deep-rooted culture of sexism has been a relief for some victims of military sexual assault. A former sergeant instructor, Lynne Rochford, left the army in frustration because of the culture of sexism at every level. She told the media, "As a sergeant I would stand up for my women soldiers only to have senior male officers cover it up."

Another Adelaide woman who experienced sexual harassment in the navy told the media that despite promises the culture of sexism had not changed in 20 years. She described how men exposed their genitals daily and her roommate in recruit school was routinely paged by her petty

officer to perform oral sex. She commented, "Poor behaviour was always witnessed by the senior officers who never said anything ... they often joined in."

Despite these reports, some at the top of the military have gone to great lengths to argue that the extent of sexual harassment is either overstated or exaggerated. The ADFA Graduates Association's Stephen Rohan-Jones described the media coverage of sexual assault as "unbalanced" and denied any culture of sexism.

This is not the first time that the shocking sexism in the military has been brought to public attention. A 400-page report into the HMAS Success commissioned in 2009 described a "predatory culture" on the naval ship. Sailors set a "bounty" on having sex with at least one female sailor amid other appalling sexist antics.

Institutional sexism

In the wake of the revelation, the government announced no less than six reviews into the conduct of ADFA and the incident itself.

But the Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Defence Minister Stephen Smith have also made great play of the move to lift the ban on women serving in all frontline combat roles. The move was described in *The Australian* as a "watershed" moment for women in Australia. But it is an attempt to divert attention away from the evidence of the scale of the sexist abuse and obvious neglect by the top army brass.

Gillard says this will promote gender equality and equal opportunity. She explained, "I have a view that men and women are equal. A few years ago I heard Peter Cosgrove say that men and women should have an equal right to fight and die for their country. I think he is right about that." Women already serve in some frontline positions, but in future every frontline role, including infantry combat operations, will be open to women who are able to perform them.

Predictably, there has been a sexist backlash. Neil James, executive director of the Australia Defence Association, said that calls for all army roles to be opened to women were "simplistic" because their innate physical weakness compared to men's would result in higher casualties.

But, as much as socialists oppose any form of discrimination against women in the military, or anywhere else, the idea that formal equality will do anything to reform the military is nonsense. Sexism is institutionalised in the army because of its very nature and role in society.

The ADFA promotes and advertises itself to possible recruits as "more than a university", and that is certainly true. The military is unlike any other workplace or institution within society. Its job is to fight wars and occupy countries in the interests of Australian corporations and the ruling class. In the local region, Australian military intervention has helped keep East Timor, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific islands open for exploitation by Australian mining companies.

Far from promoting "peacekeeping" and "reconstruction", the Australian military has fought alongside the US in two disastrous occupations, in Iraq and Afghanistan. Here it has helped impose social structures that reinforce the prevailing values of the imperialist regimes and their client warlords, and the oppression of women that goes with that. Pretending that such a sexist institution can bring "women's rights" to Afghanistan is a sickening piece of hypocrisy.

These soldiers drop bombs on wedding parties. They kick down household doors, point guns at men, women and children—and kill them.

In order to create an army that is conditioned to kill, soldiers are routinely brutalised in order to be “toughened up” and obey orders. The “toughening up” process for soldiers about to go to war can involve intense pain, bullying, violence, sleep deprivation and humiliation.

There has been a proliferation of books written by soldiers describing the horror of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In one, British soldier Captain Tim Illingworth describes his experience in Afghanistan, saying amongst the occupying forces there was, “no shortage of complete lunatics”. For them, women and men, the resistance are all “ragheads” and “a bunch of flip-flop, dress-wearing bastards”.

Women, of course, are just as capable of physical brutality as men, but there is nothing liberating for women in that kind of equality.

The culture of the army is built on physical violence and dehumanisation of the enemy. Its own culture reproduces the sexism of the political order it seeks to impose. It is no wonder that within this environment women are subjected to degrading treatment by fellow soldiers and are told to “suck it up” when confronted with sexual violence.

A 2008 survey of female visitors to a US veterans’ hospital recorded that 41 per cent reported being sexually assaulted while in the military, and 29 per cent reported being raped. In 2009, the number of reported cases increased by up to 11 per cent, but even Pentagon officials acknowledge that the exact figures are hard to determine because of the culture of retribution for women who report assaults.

Formal equality or liberation?

The government has appointed Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick to investigate sexism within the military. But Broderick has also endorsed Gillard’s effort to get more women into combat roles as a way to challenge sexist attitudes in the military.

This call for formal equality with men in the military mirrors the push by Australian Industry Group CEO Heather Ridout for more women on corporate boards.

Of course, the lack of women on corporate boards is an indication of the wider discrimination against women in society.

But sexism is not simply the product of “bad ideas” that can be gradually educated away or changed by putting a few women in influential positions. Women’s oppression is actually encouraged and perpetuated a tiny minority, both women and men, at the top of society.

The idea that it is “natural” for women to perform unpaid labour in the family bringing up children serves the interests of the CEOs and major shareholders of the major corporations, the newspaper bosses, etc. It means the cost of child rearing is borne privately, instead of having to be met through funding increased social services like childcare.

Having more women running today’s institutions and system does not demolish the structures that perpetuate sexism—it is class interests that still predominate. Gail Kelly, ranked the eighth most powerful woman in the world, mother of four and CEO of Westpac Bank, has nothing in common with the female tellers she employs and exploits as ruthlessly as any male boss.

More Gail Kellys does nothing to address the social questions confronting working class women like equal pay, affordable childcare, and the state of public services like health, education and public transport. Our first female Prime Minister Julia Gillard has done nothing to address the issues that do affect working class women.

While Gillard talks up her efforts to open up positions for women, more women generals or women in combat positions will do nothing to change the shocking treatment of women in the military.

A real fight for women's liberation requires challenging the governments, corporations, social institutions and the armies that perpetuate and benefit from sexism.

Who are Solidarity?

Solidarity is a socialist group with branches across Australia.

We are opposed to the madness of capitalism, which is plunging us into global recession and misery at the same time as wrecking the planet's future. We are taking the first steps towards building an organisation that can help lead the fight for an alternative system based on mass democratic planning, in the interests of human need not profit. Read more about Solidarity [here](#) or check out details of our meetings and events [here](#).

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