

Sexual Victimization at the National Military Academies

The US military academies operate in a dual capacity. In addition to the mission of developing future military leaders, these institutions provide a college education to attendees. In other words, the military academies are institutions of higher education. It was not until the mid-1970s that the military academies began admitting female cadets into their programs. The integration of the two genders met with resistance. For example, the last all-male graduating class of the Air Force Academy sported T-shirts and other attire imprinted with the logo “LCWB” or “Last Class Without Broads,” one of the more staid euphemisms (Fowler, 2003: 59). Other practices contributed to an atmosphere that was hostile toward women. A 2002 survey of the social climate at the Air Force Academy revealed that more than a quarter of the male cadets did not believe that women had a place on the campus. Virtually every female cadet expressed concern for her safety when she found herself alone at night (Fowler, 2003: 59). The practice of not allowing the doors to sleeping quarters to be locked at night fanned these fears.

It was against this backdrop that administrators became aware that sexual assault and sexual harassment were problematic issues. There were 142 allegations of sexual assault at the Air Force Academy from 1993 to 2002. Other estimates place the sexual victimization rate at 60 percent of cadets and midshipmen (Snyder et al., 2012). Of course, one must balance these figures against rampant non-reporting. Fowler (2003) discovered that 80 percent of the female cadets who said they had been sexually assaulted did not report the incident. Almost one in five women said they became sexual assault victims during their stay at the Academy. Another four out of five women were the targets of sexual harassment (Fowler, 2003: 16). A US Department of Defense report confirms a similar non-reporting figure among all active-duty members throughout the entire military service in 2011 (Cronk, 2013).

While the Fowler report went on to advance a series of recommendations, Congress considered the problem serious enough to warrant establishing a task force to take an expanded look at all the national military academies. Starting with the premise that the military academies recruit only the “cream of the crop,” the task force posed a simple question: “Why then, with such high-quality youth and high standards of discipline, do acts of sexual harassment and sexual assaults still occur?” (Howeing & Rumburg, 2005: 8).

The task force recognized, among other things, the existence of a sexually abusive environment on military campuses. It turned the spotlight squarely on the service academy culture. In an effort to defeat this milieu, the institutions must address social and institutional practices that devalue women (Houser, 2007; Suris & Lind, 2008). While a variety of reforms and victim services programs have been implemented, these observations regarding the incidence of sexual violence at the military service academies stem from the very same vulnerable age groups that both the NCWSV and NVAW isolated.

More developments sponsored by the US Department of Defense appear on its Sexual Assault Prevention and Response website located at www.sapr.mil/.

References

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