

# WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

## The organizational culture in the military and the challenges of sexual harassment and abuse



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**T**he core mission of the armed forces is to defend the national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the country. Over the past decades, in the face of social and political transformations, the military have had to adapt to changes and new contexts of action. The increased number of women in the military ranks is part of those transformation processes. Such increase is not only quantitative<sup>1</sup> – it is also reflected in the roles women play in the military structures. Their incorporation is considered positive both for the institution as well as for society. However, this new situation poses challenges that require observation and critical analysis, including the question of sexual harassment and abuse in the military ranks, representing serious acts of indiscipline that curtail the full development of the military career.

Sexual harassment and abuse is a complex matter to address in the military ranks due to its institutional particular characteristics. This analysis is aimed at presenting some of the issues that require attention, such as the role played by the military organizational culture and the effects on it.

## **The military organization**

To understand the military organizational (institutional) culture, it is necessary to analyze it from two perspectives: the *military vision*, which promotes the cohesion of its members and their commitment to the institution through the adherence to its principles and values, and the *human rights perspective vision*, the framework on which institutional practices are based or should be designed.

In the context of the military organizational culture, the issue of sexual abuse or harassment relates to two important aspects: unequal power relations and decision-making, and subordination to higher military command and rank. In this work environment, military life is based on respect for hierarchy, military rank and obedience. For this reason, research on these matters becomes a difficult task, unless you are a “*military woman*”, as it gives a better understanding of some behaviors often neglected. Such is the case of harassment coming from other military women (between peers), assuming that gender-based violence is exerted mainly by men, as a naturalized and “almost... almost” accepted practice, but when it occurs between military women, it is not considered harmful. In those cases, a psychological evaluation or medical treatment is used and applied most commonly to the lower-rank victim.

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<sup>1</sup> Chacón, Rosita. *Historias de vida de mujeres militares: 30 años*. Joint Staff of the Armed Forces, Quito, 2021, pp. 38-42.



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In the military organizational culture, there is an interconnection between hierarchy, military rank and discipline, as they promote the proper individual and collective conduct/discipline of military personnel, their professional performance and institutional strengthening. Values such as institutional cohesion, military spirit and honor, supported by military discipline, understood as the unconditional adherence and subordination to standing legal statutes, and by the timely and full compliance with legal orders and instructions, contribute to the accomplishment of the military's constitutional mission.

From the operational perspective, human rights restrict the exercise of power and discretion, as well as any abuse of authority by State agents in the discharge of their functions, which may violate military principles and values, objective morality and professional ethics. Some of these are specified in writing, but their definition is unclear or ambiguous, although they constitute common practices, such as symbolic and psychological violence<sup>2</sup>, sexual and reproductive health, and family life. These rights may be breached in practice, since at the time they are applied in the internal regime, in military operations or inside military barracks among colleagues, they ultimately involve people and their own personal decisions. Additionally offenders shall respond disciplinarily for their individual behavior, actions or failures to act, which constitute legally defined disciplinary offences, thus assuming their responsibility within the framework of mitigating and aggravating circumstances.

In particular, there is a pervasive concern about interpersonal relations and the interaction among superiors, peers and subordinates, where treatment must be respectful, but horizontally and vertically differentiated.

<sup>2</sup> Chacón, Rosita. *Mujer Militar: su inclusión en las Fuerzas Armadas*. Ministerio de Defensa Nacional. Quito, 2016, pp. 109-118. Available at <https://www.cehist.mil.ec/index.php/publicaciones-2/libros/coleccion-ejercito-ecuatoriano-2/advert/168-mujer-militar-su-inclusión-en-las-fuerzas-armadas>

In some cases, gender-based violence, discrimination, abuse or sexual or labor harassment may occur in the terms specified by the International Labor Organization<sup>3</sup>, which describes certain behaviors or actions having legal effects and considered as sexual abuse or harassment against female military personnel. We paraphrase such terms here, adapting them to the military work context.

- *Physical sexual abuse/harassment*: unnecessary proximity and touching (patting the shoulder or the back); undesired physical contact; asking for sexual favors; groping, pulling or tweaking in a sexual way; possessing, making or disseminating pornographic material.
- *Verbal sexual abuse/harassment*: calling outside working hours, including at home; insinuating with sexual connotations; prying into the other person's way of life.
- *Non-verbal sexual abuse/harassment*: symbolic violence (veiled/grey area); negative judgements; disturbing remarks and looks; sexualized jokes and gestures; spreading sexual rumors about the victim.

In general, the legal basis regulating the discipline of the Armed Forces provides a disciplinary regime for military personnel who, by action or omission, infringe the legal provisions and obligations and internal rules and regulations. Thus, military personnel have disciplinary administrative responsibility if they violate this disciplinary regime, and may be punished with arrest and even with dismissal from active service, without prejudice to any civil or criminal proceedings that may arise from such misconduct. By way of example, I will quote the main disciplinary offences classified as mild, serious or threatening set out in the Ecuadorean military law (Armed Forces Personnel Organic Law and Discipline LOPDFA-2023, Articles 193 to 196<sup>4</sup>):

- Mocking, using discriminatory terms based on race or ethnicity or homophobic, improper, offensive, rude or misogynous terms; adopting attitudes or making gestures aimed at undermining the dignity of a subordinate or the authority of a superior military member.
- Addressing a subordinate, teacher, or public servant or employee using nicknames or offensive terms.
- Making offensive remarks about or criticizing military personnel using any means of communication, social networks or other collective means of dissemination.
- Making insinuations of a sexual nature.
- Engaging in actions constituting sexual or workplace abuse or harassment against military personnel or employees of the Military Institution, when such actions have been duly proven.

3 International Labor Organization. *Género, salud y seguridad en el trabajo*. Hoja informativa. 4: "El hostigamiento o acoso sexual". Available at [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---sro-san\\_jose/documents/publication/wcms\\_227404.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---sro-san_jose/documents/publication/wcms_227404.pdf). See also: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms\\_908897.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms_908897.pdf)

4 Available at [https://www.defensa.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2023/02/LEY-ORGANICA-DE-PERSONAL-Y-DISCIPLINA-DE-LAS-FUERZAS-ARMADAS\\_ene\\_2023.pdf](https://www.defensa.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2023/02/LEY-ORGANICA-DE-PERSONAL-Y-DISCIPLINA-DE-LAS-FUERZAS-ARMADAS_ene_2023.pdf)



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## Including the gender perspective

In order to improve the interpretation and application of the rights enjoyed by military women, without any biases or distortions, it is necessary to bear in mind the participation and the diverse roles of women in military life. In addition to traditional roles (such as in combat units, combat support and combat service support), women also participate in administrative, technological, logistical and procurement activities and tasks. They also play a part in employment and deployment in the context of coordinated military operations; in joint, combined and complementary operations; in peace and humanitarian aid missions; in humanitarian demining action (anti-personnel mines); in urban combat (terrorism and counter-terrorism); in cyber-defense operations; in risk management activities; and in activities related to natural disasters, among others.

Given the diverse roles played by military women and other functions they could undertake, it is essential to strengthen inclusion processes and guarantee an optimum workplace environment where professionalism and mutual respect should be the norm. To this end, it is necessary to generate more inclusive mechanisms with high conduct and discipline standards, promote specific cross-cutting actions in all training processes (recruitment, job postings, entry and selection), as well as in military education development and training processes. This includes designing curricula, incorporating fourth-level graduate military professors, applying academic rigor, and complying with internal regulations based on human rights and equality approaches: gender, disability, interculturality, inter-generationality and human mobility, as promotion and strengthening tools and a way to prevent future and potential infringements of rights. It is also necessary to establish prevention, response and accountability mechanisms to address cases of sexual harassment and abuse in the military ranks.

## Sexual harassment and abuse in the context of military institutional culture

Although it is true that rules, public policies, resolutions, affirmative actions, protocols and good institutional gender practices do not change by themselves the reality of institutions, they do contribute to its improvement. However, such initiatives should be accompanied by improvements in organizational culture, which will in turn cause positive transformations in the conduct, behavior, patterns and internal practices. At present, women have appropriated the exercise of their rights, despite the risk of becoming more exposed to the attacks and hostilities generated by certain attitudes that may persist, such as being judged for being women, for their different thinking or for occupying spaces and competing for the positions usually held by men in the past.

Besides, sectoral public gender policies need to be supplemented by the implementation of strategies aimed at materializing and operationalizing the rules. This prevents them from remaining only as declarative documents, allowing to know the actual causes of issues affecting military institutions, such as desertions of female officer students and female combat candidates in military education academies; the reasons that cause women to present their voluntary retirement after the minimum active service period; or accelerated and premature retirement (abandonment of post). The effective implementation of such strategies will determine whether the reasons are linked to sensitive aspects such as leadership and/or command conflicts, change of duties, courses and promotions, organizational vacancies and annual quotas, incidence of family and children issues, working conditions and environment, gender-based violence, health conditions, disability, etc.

Ultimately, this enables to identify such aspects affecting the adaptation of female military personnel to professional standards and demands, as well as the influence of certain improper institutional practices (symbolic violence) sometimes not visible, such as wrong, distorted or discretionary criteria, and discriminatory symbolic behaviors avoiding the regulatory, administrative and disciplinary control of hierarchical superiors.

In this context, it is important to note that, in most Latin American countries, sexual or workplace abuse or harassment in the military organizational culture has been included in military statutes, in keeping with national regulations as a rule. This has allowed military women to file formal claims, complaints or petitions related to gender-based violence situations. Increased information on the treatment of such cases will also help reach conclusions. Hence the importance of promoting a sustained process of plans and programs favoring the implementation of an inclusive and preventive public policy. Obtaining more data on sexual or workplace abuse or harassment is a complicated task. In some cases, hard data is not available; in other cases, perhaps the issue is not a priority and the acts of violence go unnoticed. The alleged victims do not always accuse their harassers/aggressors as they fear the media dissemination of recordings, videos or audios illegally –covertly obtained by the aggressor–, which leaves the victim as the sole active party in the proceedings, fearing hostile comments against her. Victims are



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often offended, disqualified, discredited and humiliated, and are the subject of scornful remarks that place them in an inferior and disadvantaged position.

According to my factual and academic experience, women bring forward their testimonies (cases), taking advantage of the opportunity to express themselves freely in workshops, round tables, work meetings, anonymous surveys, face to face or virtual questionnaires, individual interviews and/or gender focus groups. In these contexts, they denounce the existence of a sexist language and/or doublespeak, inappropriate physical gestures, patronizing and veiled language, psychological harassment, male jargon, and expressions questioning their physical appearance, ability for military service, professional performance, sexual and reproductive health, as the most frequent forms of sexual or workplace abuse or harassment. This generates a threshold (range) of violence that upsets military women. As measures against these situations, it is recommended to “report” such situations to the superior immediately above and to avoid, as far as possible, any *direct or indirect command relationships* or contacts with male or female personnel with these types of behaviors, namely insensitive, indifferent and unsympathetic towards the suffering of a comrade in arms, including attitudes by some military women who exhibit inexplicable animosity and hostility, thus evidencing a lack of gender solidarity.

A self-critical reflection thus becomes relevant, since it would help to establish an objective evaluation and a real and empathic connection with these cases of sexual abuse or harassment and with any form of violence against women in the workplace, and obtain immediate knowledge of the versions of the persons involved. This would allow to set in motion the response and intervention protocols, the systems and channels providing protection, and the containment networks, as well as the mechanisms protecting and accompanying the victim/

complainant, in order to prevent any threat or intimidation against their personal integrity or, even worse, possible retaliations. In particular, this would help to prevent the recurrence of these situations. If actions or mechanisms fail to be implemented in due time when it is confirmed that the violence is systematic and recurring, the consequences can have unexpected impacts and, as has already happened, may end in public apologies and (symbolic) compensation measures strongly applied by the judiciary.

Therefore, it is essential to implement mechanisms to receive formal claims, complaints or petitions. This allows to make visible and raise awareness on the complexity of these situations (where the victim is the only visible party and the harasser is absent), since victims usually feel alone and defenseless vis-a-vis their aggressors, who consider them to be “*disloyal to their buddies*” (military comrades). Those mechanisms also generate trust in the technical handling of the investigation, ensuring credibility, confidentiality, privacy and non-revictimization. Otherwise, victims become discouraged and disheartened and choose not to denounce the situation and keep silent, hoping that someday there will be guarantees and conditions enabling complaints to be made. In practice, this represents a reversal in the rights and the progress reached regarding gender issues.

### **Conclusion: considerations for peacekeeping troop-contributing countries**

The idea of masculinity and physical strength is very important in the military ranks, as their instruction, training and operational employment is conceived in the context of, and intrinsically linked to, armed conflicts (conventional and asymmetric warfare). These contexts require a regular military force with an excellent physical fitness. However, because of the different effects caused on the civilian population by conflict situations and/or humanitarian crises in which peace operations are deployed, military personnel are required to carry out multiple tasks, including the protection of the civilian population. Because of this direct contact with the communities, the incorporation and the increased presence of military women in peacekeeping operations is one of the objectives to be achieved.

Hence, particularly military women that serve in Intelligence, Engineering and Communications arms, as well as peacekeepers (trained in the historical, legal and cultural context of the area of deployment), who are part of military contingents/components and who know the realities in the territory, contribute to generate an environment of trust and empathy with the population and interact better with other women. They are essential to support social campaigns and actions on sexual and reproductive health, aid and assistance to gender-based violence victims by using the dialogue and mediation mechanisms they are well acquainted with. In addition, as a result of their military education, professional development and training, they have developed certain abilities and skills that empower them. In addition, the link generated between women encourages and promotes “*early alert networks*”, which warn about dangers





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and threats, provide information to be translated into intelligence, and help to monitor and report on hostile scenarios, tasks and activities. These networks could be strengthened at operational and tactical levels, including in platoons and patrols.

An effective professional performance in a peace mission is impacted by complex situations derived from the context where the mission is deployed, including sexual violence, which, in addition to being a war tactic based on male and patriarchal supremacy, is used to humiliate, punish, obtain privileged information, destroy and suppress the “enemy”, as well as undermine troop morale, as those violent actions tarnish and discredit their work and deployment. For this reason, it is imperative to create a protective environment for vulnerable women, girls, boys and adolescents at operational and tactical level, because some victims must be taken to health centers (always with their consent and knowledge of what is going to happen to them). This measure fosters spontaneity and recognition on the part of the civil population towards military women. Women are empathetic with each other, respecting their confidentiality and privacy at all times, helping prevent and mitigate damages and impacts.

High professionalism and discipline standards in a peace mission should be promoted not only in the interaction with the civilian population but also within contingents. The occurrence of sexual harassment and abuse cases not only damages the image of the troop contributing country but also jeopardizes the effective achievement of the altruistic objectives pursued by the mission, such as promoting peace and security in the host population. In this sense, the United Nations have established the ten rules contained in the “*Code of Personal Conduct for Blue Helmets*”, which sets out the consequences of any infringement. The sanctions depend on the gravity of the misconduct incurred by military experts, observers or peacekeepers and are the following: internal disciplinary action (verbal or written admonishment, fines, detention); repatriation / termination of contract (military or civilian, as the case may be); criminal proceedings (in the host country, local justice); financial liability (negligent damage to or loss of UN property)<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Chacón, Rosita. *Avances de Género en las Fuerzas Armadas Ecuatorianas: 20 años*. Fuerzas Armadas de Ecuador Comando Conjunto, Quito, 2020, pp. 126. Available at <https://www.cehist.mil.ec/index.php/publicaciones/libros/coleccion-ejercito-ecuatoriano-2/advert/169-avances-de-genero-en-lasfuerzas-armadas-ecuatorianas-20-años>

The above considerations point to the need to strengthen the operationalization of United Nations Resolution 1325 and its supplementary resolutions, which acknowledge the differentiated and disproportionate impacts caused by armed conflicts on the female population and recognize that the representation of women in peace and humanitarian aid operations should be increased. Also recommended is the implementation of National Action Plans, which provide opportunities to make visible the practical actions undertaken by countries in order to effectively implement public policies on the respect and promotion of women's rights.

The organic and systematic reflection on the issues discussed in this document will contribute to the solutions mentioned herein and to military participation in peace operations and will help to prepare the institutions for future missions. The inclusion of women goes beyond just allowing them to join the military. We must reflect on how to guarantee their continued stay in the military ranks in order for them to develop their "Professional Military Career Plan" in an adequate work environment, without any abuse or harassment, violence or conscientious objections, allowing them to reconcile and achieve a minimum balance with their personal life. Although the participation of military women has increased in numbers, this inclusive process is far from finished. There will always be other aims to achieve, because female profiles and leaderships are still in construction; although women carry out traditionally masculine functions, their actions are somewhat limited by their classification and rank or by the military organizational culture itself.

All of us women, by way of gender solidarity and historical debt, although we may not have been openly discriminated against and as a remuneration for what we have gained by fortune, have the moral obligation to narrow inequality, discrimination and violence gap, as well as to contribute to the elimination of fear and to promote the filing of complaints about improper behaviors. No woman should be a victim of sexual or work abuse or harassment or any other kind of violence in any context or work environment.

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