

UNITED KINGDOM

Addressing sexual harassment in the armed forces

In 2004, after several high-profile cases of sexual harassment and facing an increasing number of complaints, the United Kingdom's Equal Opportunities Commission (now part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission) embarked upon a formal investigation of sexual harassment against women serving in the armed forces. The investigation was suspended in June 2005 on the condition that the armed forces fulfil an *Agreement and Action Plan to Prevent and Deal Effectively with Sexual Harassment in the Armed Forces*.¹

The Action Plan's goal was to ensure that the Ministry of Defence (MoD), with the support and assistance of the Equal Opportunities Commission, took practical and effective steps within a reasonable time to prevent and deal effectively with sexual harassment. This meant:

- Creating a working environment in which sexual harassment is considered unacceptable
- Ensuring that service personnel who experience sexual harassment feel able to complain and have confidence in the complaints process
- Ensuring that the outcome of any service redress and administrative procedures relating to sexual harassment effectively remedies the sexual harassment and protects the victim from future victimisation
- Providing effective sanctions to deter and discourage sexual harassment²

The Action Plan had three phases, to be implemented over three years:

1. Diagnostics and data gathering
2. Period for the MoD to review the information collected and to propose a programme of future work to the Commission, including outcomes and targets to be achieved
3. Implementation and monitoring

The MoD commissioned extensive independent research into the nature and extent of sexual harassment in the armed forces, as part of the first phase in 2005. This research was the largest study of its kind undertaken in the UK, and was both quantitative (a survey) and qualitative (focus groups). A questionnaire was sent to all 18,178 servicewomen in the armed forces and responses were received from 9,384 (52 per cent). 29 focus group discussions—19 with servicewomen and 10 with servicemen—and 9 individual discussions with servicewomen who had experienced sexual harassment were held.

The research found that sexualised behaviours (jokes, stories, language and material) were widespread in all three services within the armed forces. 99 per cent of the servicewomen who responded to the survey had been in situations in the previous 12 months where such sexualised behaviours had taken place. There was a high tolerance of these behaviours but over half of the respondents sometimes found them offensive. Qualitative data from men suggested that there was a lack of awareness that women might be offended or upset by their language and behaviour.

Two thirds of questionnaire respondents said that sexualised behaviours had been directed at them personally in the previous 12 months. Such behaviour included making unwelcome comments, sending sexually explicit material, unwanted touching and sexual assaults. 15 per cent reported having had a "particularly upsetting" experience. The greater proportion of these comprised lower ranks and younger women.³

¹ *Agreement between the Ministry of Defence and the Equal Opportunities Commission on an Action Plan to Prevent and Deal Effectively with Sexual Harassment in the Armed Forces* (2006), http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/13856EA1-1D13-4872-A5EF-797D8EA3E025/0/mod_eoc_agreement.pdf (accessed April 27, 2009)

² Ibid.

³ Equal Opportunity Commission, *Press Release: EOC and MOD Sign New Action Plan to Address Sexual Harassment in the Armed Forces*, May 25, 2006, <http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/eoc/Defaultbdc1.html?page=18793> (accessed April 27, 2009).

UNITED KINGDOM

Addressing sexual harassment in the armed forces

Over half of those who made a formal complaint stated that there had been negative consequences as a result of doing so and 64 per cent were considering leaving the armed forces. Survey respondents strongly supported effective training for line managers on preventing and dealing with sexual harassment. Although line managers were seen as key to preventing and dealing with sexual harassment, advice and help outside the chain of command were also considered important.

On review of this data, the MoD formulated a phase three action plan that aimed to “create an environment in the Armed Forces in which harassment is recognised as inappropriate and preventable by: ensuring leaders in the Armed Forces take seriously their responsibilities to prevent and deal with harassment; ensuring the active, transparent and appropriate resolution of every complaint filed; and by putting in place ongoing, robust processes for monitoring the nature and extent of harassment.”⁴ Measures identified to this end were:

- Engagement of service personnel at all levels
- Raising awareness about the problem of sexual harassment
- Review of equality and diversity training
- Using appraisals to reinforce acceptable behaviours
- Review of harassment complaints procedures
- Support to the individuals who experience sexual harassment
- Monitoring the careers of parties to harassment
- Ongoing research on sexual harassment
- Monitoring informal and formal complaints of harassment
- Sanctions

Timing of work was set out, and key outcomes, measurements of progress and monitoring mechanisms identified. The project team leading the work was linked to a Stakeholder Working Group comprising representatives from across the services. Overall accountability for the implementation of the steps was specified as being at the highest levels: with the Secretary of State for Defence, Chief of Defence Staff and the Chiefs of Staff of the Army, Navy and Royal Air Force.

In June 2008, the Equality and Human Rights Commission conducted a final review of the MoD and armed forces’ performance to determine whether they had successfully reformed as required under the Agreement, including achieving the agreed outcomes. A follow up sexual harassment survey indicated some positive findings:

- 63 per cent of respondents believed that the sexual harassment complaints process was not biased
- 98 per cent of service personnel believed everyone has a responsibility to deal with harassment

The Commission concluded that the MoD had made a concerted effort to tackle the lack of official support for staff who wanted to report claims of harassment, had put in place a robust and fair way of handling complaints, and made it clear that harassment will not be tolerated. However, the Commission also noted that, although good processes are now

⁴ Agreement between the Ministry of Defence and the Equal Opportunities Commission on Preventing and Dealing Effectively with Sexual Harassment in the Armed Forces: Progress Report and Phase Three Action Plan (2005), http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/eoc/Docs/Actionplan_25_May_2006.doc?page=18801 (accessed April 27, 2009).

UNITED KINGDOM

Addressing sexual harassment in the armed forces

in place, problems of sexual harassment in the forces remain, which mostly derive from persisting cultural tendencies towards inappropriate behaviour to women.

While the Commission has completed its formal investigation into sexual harassment of women in the armed forces, it is committed to continue working with the MoD on addressing issues of culture. The Commission and MoD will also begin a new partnership to tackle bullying and inappropriate behaviour relating to race, sexuality and religion, as well as gender.⁵

► Measures to address sexual harassment are discussed on pages 14–15 of the *Defence Reform and Gender Tool* and on pages 8–11 of the *Security Sector Reform and Gender Tool*.

⁵ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Commission Ends Investigation into Sexual Harassment in the Armed Forces and Begins Partnership on Culture Change as Problems Persist* July 5, 2008. <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/newsandcomment/Pages/Investigationintosexualharassmentinthearmedforcesends.aspx> (accessed April 27, 2009).