

## SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN MILITARY AND HEALTHCARE SETTINGS: A DUAL-PERSPECTIVE REFLECTION

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### ABSTRACT

Sexual exploitation remains a critical issue affecting individuals in various sectors, particularly in defence and healthcare. Military institutions face challenges related to hierarchical structures and power dynamics that may facilitate such exploitation, while healthcare professionals deal with the long-term consequences experienced by victims. This article reflects on the issue from both perspectives, highlighting preventive measures, institutional responsibilities, and the necessity for an integrated approach to address the problem effectively. By fostering a culture of accountability and support, both sectors can work collaboratively to combat sexual exploitation and ensure the safety and well-being of individuals.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sexual exploitation is a prevalent issue that affects individuals across various sectors, including the defence and healthcare sectors. Unlike sexual harassment, sexual exploitation involves the abuse of power whereby an individual with higher authority would manipulate those in a lower rank to gain sexual benefits. The military, with its rigid hierarchy and power dynamics, presents an environment where such exploitation can occur, often going unreported due to fear of retaliation [1]. Meanwhile, from a healthcare perspective, the consequences of sexual exploitation extend beyond immediate trauma, leading to long-term physical and psychological harm [2]. In reflecting on this topic, we were drawn to examine sexual exploitation through both defence and health lenses due to our close engagement with these sectors. Having observed how issues of hierarchy, organisational culture, and gender imbalance influence workplace ethics and reporting behaviour, we recognised the importance of exploring how these systemic structures intersect to either perpetuate or prevent exploitation. This reflection also arises from our concern for the well-being of military and healthcare personnel; particularly how organisational responses may impact survivors' recovery and trust in the system.

This article offers a reflection based on existing literature on sexual exploitation from both perspectives and emphasises the need for a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach to combat sexual exploitation effectively. Through this reflective lens, we aim to identify key challenges and how multidisciplinary collaboration might strengthen the efforts to combat sexual exploitation. Ultimately, this reflection aspires not only to analyse the issues but also to reflect on how both sectors can move towards a survivor-centred, ethically grounded framework for systemic change.

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## 1.1 Defence Perspective: Addressing Sexual Exploitation in Military Institutions

Military environments are known for discipline and exercising the “one chain of command” system, which, while essential for operational efficiency, can also increase the probability of sexual exploitation occurring. Fear of reprisal, lack of transparency, and inadequate support mechanisms prevent victims from reporting incidents [3]. Cases of sexual exploitation within the military not only compromise the safety of personnel but also undermine institutional integrity and effectiveness [4]. The prevalence of sexual exploitation among military personnel remains a significant concern, with past studies reporting concerning statistics and underlying factors. Findings from the literature review highlight that military sexual trauma (MST) affects approximately 15.7% of military personnel, with a majority of the reported incidents occurring among women compared to men (38.4% vs. 3.9%), which includes both harassment and assault [5]. Furthermore, reports of sexual assault in the U.S. military showed a significant spike of 90% from 2004 to 2009, suggesting either an increase in incidents or improved reporting mechanisms [6].

In trying to understand these structural vulnerabilities, it becomes apparent that sexual exploitation within the military is not just a result of individual misconduct but a sign of deeper organisational and cultural dynamics. Recognising this, many countries and independent bodies, including the United Nations, have implemented various initiatives to prevent sexual exploitation. These efforts include enhancing education, prevention, and improving reporting processes [7-8]. However, sexual exploitation remains a significant problem with persistent challenges in enforcement and cultural change. For instance, in the United States, the Department of Defense (DoD) instituted a programme called Care for Victims of Sexual Assault Task Force (CVSATH), which has been criticised for its lack of understanding of sex offender behaviour and the effectiveness of its prevention strategies [9]. Similarly, in Canada, Operation HONOUR has been launched, aiming to eliminate sexual misconduct within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) by fostering collaboration among researchers, policymakers and the military to develop new training, culture changes and treatment approaches [10]. However, studies have reported the lack of effectiveness of this programme due to sexist beliefs and organisational culture [11-12].

In appraising the statistics, existing policies and initiatives, we are compelled to ask: how can cases of sexual exploitation continue to rise within a system that values obedience, order and discipline? This contradiction highlights that the same hierarchical structures that ensure operational efficiency may also reinforce silence, fear of reprisal and tolerance of misconduct. This reflection has led us to consider that the existing measures may be insufficiently effective. This trend may reflect a more serious systemic and cultural factor, including jurisdictional issues, impunity, hierarchical power dynamics, normalisation of misconduct, fear of retaliation and insufficient training. These observations highlight the complexity of addressing sexual exploitation within a rigid organisational setting. We have come to realise that beyond policy and enforcement, meaningful change requires a cultural shift that redefines leadership, accountability and ethical responsibility within the military. Therefore, a more proactive policy enforcement, survivor support systems, and cultural shifts toward zero tolerance are needed. Anonymous reporting mechanisms, awareness programmes on combating sexual exploitation, regular training on ethical conduct, and a strong leadership commitment to transparency and accountability are essential. Strengthening these measures will ensure that perpetrators are held responsible and that victims are aware of the available support that they may receive to prevent any further complications.

While these structural reforms are critical within the military setting, the issue of sexual exploitation also extends beyond disciplinary systems. Understanding how exploitation affects the physical, psychological, and social health of survivors is essential in designing interventions that not only punish perpetrators but also promote healing and reintegration.

## 1.2 Health Perspective: The Long-Term Consequences of Sexual Exploitation

From the healthcare perspective, it's apparent that sexual exploitation has significant physical, psychological, and social repercussions for victims. Healthcare professionals frequently encounter individuals suffering from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), reproductive health complications, and mental health disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety due to unaddressed sexual exploitation cases [13]. These health complications arise from the fear of social stigma, which leads victims to isolate themselves from the community, making reintegration into communities challenging. In reflecting on healthcare response, we have come to realise that while immediate clinical management remains essential, it is often insufficient to address the deeper, long-term consequences of

sexual exploitation. Many survivors experience repeated cycles of trauma that demand sustained and holistic interventions. Various efforts have been taken in assisting victims and survivors, such as implementing trauma-informed care, offering confidential counselling, and facilitating access to legal and social support, but reaching the stage of effectively providing support to victims is a long and challenging process due to cultural sensitivity and stigma towards this issue [14-17]. From our personal observation, due to the social stigma, victims often attempt to cope with the issues on their own, relating to the mental health issues that would subsequently impact their quality of life (QoL).

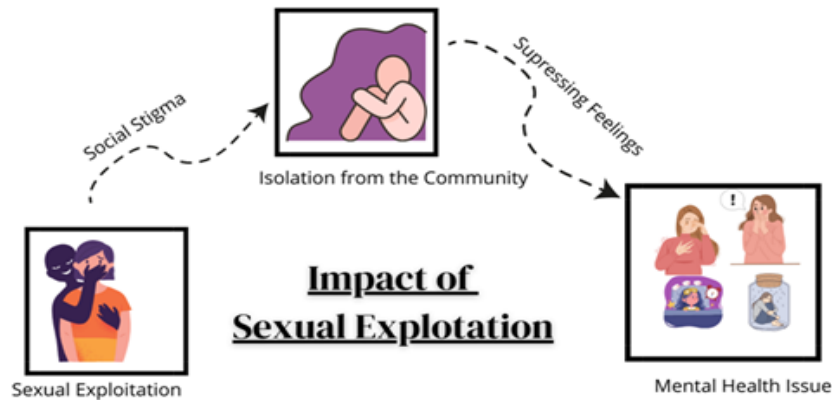


Figure 1: Impact of sexual exploitation

These patterns reveal that the health system faces similar challenges to those within military institutions, specifically in addressing stigma, silence and institutional barriers. These observations make us reflect that interdisciplinary collaboration between medical professionals, social workers, and law enforcement agencies is crucial in providing holistic care to survivors. Victims and survivors not only need to be supported from a health perspective but also from a social perspective. This interdisciplinary collaboration among medical professionals, social workers, and law enforcement agencies is vital in ensuring holistic care for survivors. Addressing these needs demands a trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and intersectoral approach that positions healthcare as both a frontline responder and an advocate for systemic change.

## 2.0 BRIDGING THE GAP: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

In reflecting on both the defence and healthcare perspectives, we have come to recognise that while their contexts differ, the barriers they face share similarities. Both sectors struggle with hierarchical structures, institutional stigma, and limitations in survivor-centred response systems. These parallels highlight that addressing sexual exploitation requires not only internal reform within each sector but also meaningful collaboration between them. Bridging the strengths of defence discipline with the compassion healthcare may offer a more comprehensive and sustainable solution to these issues. Combating sexual exploitation requires a coordinated effort between the defence and health sectors. Military institutions should integrate health-based interventions into their policies, ensuring that survivors receive appropriate medical and psychological care. Likewise, healthcare professionals must be equipped to recognise and respond to exploitation cases within defence settings.

For instance, an independent committee comprising medical, legal, and psychological teams could be established to provide comprehensive survivor-centred support that integrates healthcare management, psychosocial rehabilitation, and legal redress mechanisms. Importantly, this committee should operate under a higher and neutral authority such as the Prime Minister's Office or an equivalent national body, to ensure its autonomy and integrity. Such structural independence is essential to minimise the influence of internal organisational culture, mitigate power dynamics that may suppress reporting, and protect the confidentiality and safety of survivors. In addition, committee members should receive specialised training in military organisational behaviour and leadership style to enable effective interventions in combating sexual exploitation. While maintaining its independence, the committee should collaborate closely with the existing military medicine team to ensure clinical continuity. Designated military liaison officers can serve as a bridge between the committee and the defence institution.

By combining structural independence, contextual competence, and cross-sectoral collaboration, this approach can strengthen accountability mechanisms and foster trust among all stakeholders involved. Ultimately, fostering a culture of respect, accountability, and support within both sectors is necessary to create a safer and more ethical environment for all individuals. By acknowledging the synergy of defence and health perspectives, stakeholders can work towards a comprehensive framework that not only addresses sexual exploitation but also prioritises survivor well-being and systemic change.

### 3.0 CONCLUSIONS

Due to the social stigma, sexual exploitation remains an alarming issue within both defence and healthcare settings, requiring a holistic approach to prevention and intervention. Across the military setting, strict hierarchies and power imbalances can create vulnerabilities, necessitating robust policies, awareness programmes, and leadership accountability to mitigate the rise of sexual exploitation. From a healthcare perspective, the consequences of sexual exploitation extend beyond immediate physical harm, contributing to long-term psychological distress and social isolation. Addressing these challenges requires a trauma-informed approach, synergy within multidisciplinary teams, and accessible support services to aid survivors in their recovery. Ultimately, fostering a culture of accountability, education, and survivor-centred care is critical to effectively combating sexual exploitation and ensuring the well-being of affected individuals.

This reflection has highlighted that meaningful progress depends on adopting a trauma-informed approach, fostering synergy across multiple disciplines, and ensuring accessible support services to aid survivors in their recovery. In this regard, we believe that establishing an independent committee comprising medical, legal, and psychological experts could strengthen existing mechanisms by providing survivor-centred support, promoting transparency, and ensuring accountability across both sectors. Such a committee that operates under a neutral authority and is supported by trained military liaison officers could bridge the gap between defence and healthcare systems, offering coordinated responses that protect survivors and uphold institutional integrity. Ultimately, we believe fostering a culture of accountability, education, and survivor-centred care is critical to effectively combating sexual exploitation and ensuring the well-being and dignity of all individuals.

### 4.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### 5.0 AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Abdul Rashid, S. A. Z. (Conceptualisation; Literature Review; Writing)

Adam, S. H. (Literature Review, Editing)

Mohd Tohit, N. F. (Literature Review, Editing)

Wan Ahmad Fakuradzi, W. F. S. (Literature Review, Editing)

Ahmad Zaidi, N. A. (Literature Review, Editing)

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