"She’s a good hand": Navy women’s strategies in masculinist workplaces

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Women in the Royal Australian Navy now have access to ninety-five percent of current work positions. My data show that many of these women experience pressure to adjust to and accept dominant notions of femininity, which seek to reinforce sexual divisions of labour. Discourses surrounding feminine positioning in the military are constantly reinforced through language, ritual and interaction. This paper explores the ways in which RAN women come to subvert and resist cultural givens surrounding their sexuality and gender, particularly as they fight the pressure to conform to a male-centred view of Navy work. The strategies Naval women employ as they carve out a space for themselves within various workplaces include confrontation, accommodation, resignation, intervention, avoidance, sex and sexual ambiguity and solidarity. Whether women use informal or formal channels for dealing with grievances such as sexual harassment or other forms of sexual violence, on the whole they show resilience and empowerment in their day-to-day working lives.

INTRODUCTION

Discourses of resistance which define the marginalised as active social agents, as opposed to passive victims, have burgeoned within the sociological, feminist and pro-feminist literature in recent years. Cockburn for instance challenges the notion that girls are passive in their oppression. She asserts that girls are active in resisting and undermining conventional femininity thereby challenging their subordination. "[O]ne way girls have of doing this is to refuse ‘women’s work’ and women’s domestic roles and make a bid for ‘men’s work’ and a space for women in men’s world" (Cockburn 1987, 44) Similarly Mac An Ghaill’s work (1994, 149) which explores girls’ “resistance and contestation” in a school setting reveals that girls in mixed gender schools use various procedures of "feminine disruptions, solidarity and use of sexuality ... which were expressed in specific class and ethnic cultural forms.”

Other feminist literature also shows women as active agents in relation to male behaviour and male violence outside the workplace (Kelly 1988; Summerall and Taylor 1992; Easteal 1994; Bryson 1994). Whilst Kelly’s
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(1988) work does not look specifically at male-dominated work environments, it does explore the strategies women employ when coping with male violence in their day-to-day lives. Some of these strategies include what she terms “minimising strategies,” where women minimise the effects of male violence perpetrated against them. In dealing with violent incidences women use multiple strategies of “forgetting” and “remembering.” Silence, so as not to incur further negative consequences, is a tactic also used by women and is linked to avoidance. Summerall and Taylor’s (1992) collection of personal testimonies from women who have endured sexual violence, reveals women’s resourcefulness, sense of humour, and resilience in their responses. Some of the strategies employed include using forceful or humorous words; physical force; forming alliances with other women; playing deaf; walking away; trying to pretend it didn’t happen; and ridiculing the harasser.

Disclosing experiences of sexual violence is another strategy used for dealing with and surviving the violence incurred. Bryson’s (1994) and Easteal’s (1994) research demonstrates the importance of disclosure and of women breaking the silence. As Bryson (1994, 7) states: “Breaking the silence has been accepted as a vital element if there is to be a reduction in patterns of violent behaviour.” Disclosure, however, is not always viable since many women in work cultures hold fears that relate to issues of personal safety, job security and further promotions. Within Naval culture women are discursively positioned as good/bad, chaste/unchaste, moral/immoral (Agostino 1997). When women report incidences of sexual violence they run the risk of being positioned on the negative side of the dualism. To be seen by peers and those in authority as bad, immoral and unchaste can have real material affects upon job prospects and promotion.

Thus Navy women experience constant pressures and surveillance to conform to modes of workplace arrangements. They are required to accept dominant notions of femininity which seek to reinforce sexual divisions of labour, and adjust to heterosexist and misogynistic positions. As Mac An Ghaill (1994, 131) notes in his work on schools, these discourses are “constantly reinforced ... through language, ritual and interaction.” The following discussion depicts how women in the Navy challenge these cultural givens as they not only fight pressures to conform and manage their experiences of gender and sexual harassment but also sometimes successfully deflect the pressure to conform to a male-centred work environment. But what is evident is that femininity as opposed to masculinity is viewed as problematic. Hence it is often “femininity” which is altered, and “masculinity” which remains unchallenged (Cockburn 1991; Donaldson 1991; Stivers 1991). The narratives presented reveal that RAN women deal with sexual violence at work in a number of ways; through confrontation, accommodation, resignation, intervention, avoidance, sex and sexual ambiguity and solidarity.
CHALLENGING SEXUAL HARASSERS

Personal confrontation

Some of the women interviewed spoke of dealing with incidents of sexual harassment using informal measures such as confronting the harasser directly. In all of these depictions where strategies of personal confrontation are employed, however, the perpetrator is of the same or lower rank than the woman involved. It seems that this approach is less likely to succeed in situations where the perpetrator is of a higher rank or in a position of authority over the woman. Walshok (1981) shows that women who take on a direct strategy do so with their peers and that in most cases she found a direct approach was frequently successful. The following accounts from Kathryn, a Lieutenant, and Jenny a junior sailor, interviewed at different times, highlight these points:

Kathryn: Well there was one incident, a young male Sub-Lieutenant ... had this bad habit of looking directly at my breasts when he was talking to me. One morning at breakfast he was sitting down eating ... and I walked into the room and said “Hello.” He greeted me and carried on the conversation the whole time looking at my breasts. This really annoyed me especially since it happened on a number of occasions. So on this particular morning I pipe up in a really loud voice and said, “Mark, must you always look at my tits when you talk to me?” Everyone in the room heard and roared with laughter and he went quite red and said, “Oh, you have really got me there Kathryn.”

Jenny: Men often say to me, “Come here you big breasted woman.” But I retaliate by saying, “Get a life” or “Don’t be a loser” or “Don’t you have anything better to do with your time?” If they get a bit gobby then I gob back at them. I always come back at them and they get pretty stunned. Usually they wake up to themselves. I have seen that the women who cannot do that get walked all over.... For example the woman the men call “the fat controller,” she always ends up in tears because she cannot defend herself. When the blokes are cruel to her and call her names she cries and tells the Chief, who then tells the boys to pull their heads in. It never helps though because they just rip into her even more.

When the harasser is of higher rank, however, personal confrontation is less likely to seem possible. Sally, a middle-ranking officer, makes this point in relation to a time when she attempted to assist a woman junior to her to deal with the harassment she was experiencing:

Sally: [She was] a Sub-Lieutenant, who was blatantly being sexually harassed by a Lieutenant Commander. He would phone her up and ask her for dates. He would find excuses to sit next to her at mess dinners. As the Accommodations Officer, he would engineer excuses to go out and find accommodation with her, and afterwards take her back to his place.... I mean we are talking about a Lieutenant Commander. His rank may not intimidate me but it sure as hell intimidated her.

Thus, confrontation as a strategy to resist sexual harassment has limited application. Nonetheless these accounts show that personal confrontation,
and openly challenging the harasser is a conscious strategy used by Navy women in their attempts to deal with the harassment experienced. Appearing “smart,” “tough” and in control of the situation is vital for survival for many women. To appear vulnerable and “affected” by the male comments increases the harassment rather than eliminating it. These accounts also highlight that personal confrontation works best when women are dealing with harassers who in terms of rank are positioned close to them or below them.

WORK DRESS: WOMEN IN UNIFORM

Military uniform carries with it certain codes and is a way of outwardly positioning women and men in terms of rank and power within RAN culture. It also positions women and men within gender and job specificities. By observation it is easy to distinguish the Admiral from the junior sailor, and usually the men from the women. The medals worn distinguish those who have been in Active Service (operational duties during potential or actual conflict) and those who have not. The Submariner is distinguished from the Surface Warfare Officer through the badges placed on the uniform. Chaplains and Medical Officers are also easily recognisable. Hence, the uniform works to position personnel within the naval hierarchy.

In more recent years women officers have been given the choice to wear trousers or dresses as part of their regular uniform. Stricter codes are followed for ceremonial dress and women are now required to wear the trousers when on parade. How women see themselves in their day-to-day workplaces determines what uniform they choose to wear and vice versa. That is, while some women prefer to wear trousers, still regarded as the “male” uniform, others are adamant about retaining their “femininity” and wear the more traditional female uniform—skirt or dress.

In this way uniforms and the choices women make about which style of uniform they will wear can be linked to the strategies they use to confront workplace discrimination. This is related to the multiple ways women position themselves within the Navy culture. Men wear uniforms according to the rank they hold, and according to their specialisations. However, being males in a male culture, uniform selection is a non-issue for them. To succeed in the culture, some women attempt to negate the feminine by adopting a more masculine position as a means of enhancing their legitimacy in the workplace. They may also attempt feminine dressing in accordance with the accommodation strategy. Some may use both strategies at different times and places. Thus, the way these women wear their uniform and the actual choice of uniform is very much dictated by the valorisation of the masculine and their perceived need to blend into the work culture. Dismissing femininity also valorises the masculine. Kim, a woman Lieutenant, made this point clear:

Kim: I know that I avoid dressing in an eye-catching way, if you like. I’ll dress down because I don’t want to be sticking out in the crowd. I don’t want to be
thought of, or have people say, “Oh look at her. Who is she trying to impress?” Even make-up, I don’t like wearing make-up. I don’t wear any make-up at work, whereas a lot of girls wear a lot of make-up at work. I’ll dress sharply with my uniform, and I’ll make sure my uniform looks good but anyone who wants to get good marks does that. But I’ll make sure I look respectable, but I won’t dress up to be eye-catching.

For Kim, the choices she makes regarding her uniform, by not “dressing in an eye-catching way” or in not using make-up are strategies she uses to position herself in her work sphere. By not “standing out” in the crowd, she attempts to be inconspicuous, avoid attention as a female, which she considers needs to occur if she is to succeed. It is clear that choice of uniform helps Kim “blend in” at one level. However, in doing so Kim probably positions herself outside the heterosexual discourses which govern notions of appropriate femininity and masculinity.

Paula, a senior officer, addresses the issue of “blending in.” In her twenty years of service she has witnessed a mounting pressure for women to “blend in.” To her way of thinking women are choosing dress codes that position them within a more masculine context:

Paula: Often you hear young women say that they don’t want to be noticed.... I think that women have given up some things. The thing that concerns me is that a lot of the younger women have given up their femininity.... I get the impression from wandering around in the Navy, and the Army, and the Air Force to a lesser extent that some women are not comfortable with being women any more. So they have almost tried to disguise the fact that they are women by the way they dress and the way they behave, and the way they act, in the hope that they will be left alone. If they look the same and act the same as men they’ll show that they are equal by behaving the same. They are almost denying their own femininity in order to prove that they are as good as men.

Paula’s comments illustrate that some Navy women perceive uniform policies for women as directed towards making them look more like the men. Thus, the Navy has opened the way for women to look and behave more like men and, in so doing, “make” women “equal” to men. There is some resentment among the women of these attempts, perceived or otherwise. These women consider such attempts to have a devaluing effect on their “femininity.” They want to stand out from the men, and they view the uniform as a way of doing that. They are concerned that the option to look “feminine” is slowly being taken from them. This point is illustrated well in the following interview with Sally, a middle-ranking officer:

Sally: I think that the Navy is struggling with women, in terms of where they fit in, how can we get them to fit in, what do we expect of them, all that sort of stuff. A comment was made to me last year where we have an XO [Executive Officer] who is very traditional, old-fashioned, etc. And he didn’t like the females wearing court shoes, even though it is a legal part of our rig [a general name given for uniform]. He would have a go at me by saying, “You weren’t employed by the Navy to look like a model.” They miss the point. I think that the Navy
have a lot of difficulty in accepting women for who they are and allowing them to be who they are. At the moment, thank goodness, we are allowed to still be wearing skirts, that's still part of our rig. But I know there's a push there to take skirts away from us and just make us wear pants, or shorts, with long socks. The day they make me do that is the day I leave the Navy. They get so confused with what makes you equal, next they'll be asking us to have a sex change, I mean it is ridiculous.

Clothes and uniform play an integral part in "making" the person and members are aware of the impact gender has in the workplace (Hilsdon 1995). In practice, de-sexualising the Navy uniform signifies an option for women to emulate the masculine. In negating the feminine and taking up the masculine—tough, rational, logical—women and men are opting for a position which is legitimised at the institutional level (Cohn 1993). Mary, a Seaman Officer (Lieutenant), talked about the way in which she developed a masculine way of conducting herself at work:

Mary: ... my whole attitude sort of changed to the point where ... it even seriously infringed on my personal life as well, but I just ignored I guess everything I had learnt or had developed. I let go of all the ideas and opinions I had held onto over the years previous in order to fit in.

... [I]t started to just happen and my ideas just sort of started to change and I mean I have been told by a girlfriend of mine who saw me through that time, said, I think to quote, that I "went off the rails" ... I was just so "wary" so "gung ho" that, you know, nothing else fitted into my environment except this male way of thinking.

... I guess it’s also, 'cause, like, I was trying to do well in this particular branch which also didn’t have a lot of females in at the time. So I thought it just seemed to be the best thing at the time, because I was fighting one battle and that was the learning battle, I didn’t want to be fighting the acceptance battle as well. I had to then become somebody that fitted into the culture and therefore took on the values of the culture, which are male values I suppose.

Taking on masculinist modes of behaviour is about survival (Hilsdon 1995). In order to survive in ultra-masculine areas such as in the training of Principal Warfare Officers, women might blend in by projecting the masculine in terms of speech and behaviour. Women prioritise which aspects of their work they will challenge and which they will leave unchallenged. In Mary’s case getting through the Navigators course and surviving male domination, were more important battles than directly challenging the hegemonically masculine culture. Some women view these strategies whether they involve dress codes or an acceptance of dominant masculine values and beliefs or both, as enabling them to maintain some legitimacy in an environment in which they are constantly seeking to gain credibility.

In contrast to the accounts given above, there are also women who use their uniform as a means of appearing ultra-feminine. Thus, these women are aware that taking on the masculine mode is not necessarily going to make them feel they are accepted. Indeed they choose to emphasise their
"femininity" which is their strategy to negotiate more complex workplace structures and power imbalances. Peta and Christine, both senior sailors, discuss the ways in which uniforms for women can add to the pressure for women to "become" men. Their comments emphasise how females often come to see themselves along binary constructs, within a language of either/or. That is, women are either feminine or butch. For some women, choosing the left hand side of the dualism enables them to maintain a sense of credibility because it fits in with the dominant heterosexist position. While this can be at the cost of remaining in traditionally feminised branches of the Navy, it nonetheless provides some acceptance of them by male colleagues within the culture.

Sara, a middle-ranking officer, spoke of using an ultra-feminine strategy in her workplace:

Sara: You know what, I will make a confession, I guess I have fought for that recognition to be seen first as an officer and then as a female. But then in about 1990, I had heard it said to me so many times by so many people, "Oh you are so attractive, and all the officers want to get into your pants and all that." At first I saw that as an insult and then I thought, no, I am going to use that and I do. When I go to work, my make-up is impeccable, my uniform is impeccable, I wear sheer tights, I do my hair, they all think I have just stepped out of a hair salon. I'm pleasant, I don't do anything inappropriate as far as flirting or anything like that, but if that's what they want to see then that is what I'll use. If you said that to me six years ago, I would have been horrified. But I do it now because it gets me places.

Sara has no qualms about her "femininity." Nonetheless, other women saw a certain amount of advantage in presenting in sexually ambiguous ways. For these women to keep work colleagues wondering about their sexuality is a strategy they use to ward off potential or actual sexual harassment. Wearing short hair, and the "masculine" uniform, is part of this strategy. Kim, a Lieutenant, said:

Kim: The other day at work Gary told me the others were asking him if I'm a lesbian. I just laughed. I think it's funny that the others are trying to work out what I am exactly.

K.A: Why is that?

Kim: Well as long as people are not sure about where I am coming from sexually speaking they will leave me alone. The men are curious and they are left guessing about me ... and won't know if they should or shouldn't ask me out. It's a protection thing I guess, and it allows me to get on with my work.

Another perspective is that the masculine uniforms enable women to fight against the ultra-feminine trap, a strategy used by others. Donna, spoke of her time as a cadet at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA). She states that by wearing trousers she was making a political stance and stepping outside of the forced feminine position that her male colleagues had mapped out for her:
Donna: I prefer to wear pants. When I was at the Academy [in the early 90s] if you wore pants you got so much crap from the guys. They were so threatened by females wearing pants. The furore that you could cause in winter. By third year I was wearing black pants all the time because by then they had brought in that you could wear female pants in the winter time. It was just much warmer to wear pants in Canberra in the winter time. Talk about the response from the guys. They were so threatened, and that really wasn't a long time ago.

Looking back it was funny, maybe stressful but so funny to think that these guys were so threatened by girls wearing pants. They got to the stage where the Standing Orders [current policies on particular matters such as uniform regulations] where uniforms were concerned were really out of date, and we turned up to the academic night for first years and I wore pants, and all these other girls turned up in pants as well. The Warrant Officer in charge was actually going to charge us all for wearing pants. I think what it came to was that he couldn't because Standing Orders were so out of date, that if we weren't wearing pants the uniform that we would have worn wasn't even in Standing Orders. He couldn't charge us due to this technicality. It was all pretty political really. I guess wearing pants gave me a bit of a buzz. Like I had some power they [men] didn't want me to have.

In this account, Donna makes an explicit reference to the struggle for power through uniform regulations. Not only does she succeed in making men feel uncomfortable, but she resists Standing Orders, which are fundamentally male-made policy. Similarly Belinda, a Lieutenant, finds that men have a struggle within themselves about women who challenge conventional feminine identities, and this can relate to uniforms. She detects that male senior officers in particular want women to wear skirts rather than trousers. Moreover, at official naval functions such as annual Balls and Cocktail parties women often feel pressured to buy a ball gown, or cocktail dress, rather than wear a uniform as is the requirement for men:

Belinda: I remember the day of the Passing Out Parade the rig for the day was ceremonial “Number One” [the uniform worn for parades]. The winter uniform, which now for women just as for men is trousers, right ... the XO [Executive Officer] let it be known that he hopes that the female officers will be wearing their skirts, ... and said, “Oh you girls look so nice in your high heels and black stockings. I hope you’re wearing that rig tomorrow for the passing out parade”. I heard him say this and I caught up to him and said, “Oh excuse me Sir, you know the correct rig for females, the ceremonial rig, is trousers and a jacket!” He just brushed me aside and didn’t want to discuss that you see....

There are no questions asked of the men which is their correct rig, or whether they look good in what they wear or not. I thought, “God help us!” ... [For naval Balls] a lot of the men would expect us to wear pretty dresses because we would look really nice that way. Quite often the females would set a trend by wearing ball gowns to balls as opposed to their uniform. But I was adamant, if I was going to a function, an official function, a Navy function, then I’ll wear my uniform just like the men wear theirs. But a lot of the females prefer to go for the pretty option.
It is evident from this discussion that women can negotiate the civilian/military dualism. Whilst most of the time they are positioned as military personnel through the wearing of their uniforms, at other times they are given the option to choose. Going to a Ball out of military dress for women is seen as attending a function in a more feminine mode of attire. Again we see here the public/private dualism which positions women and men along rigid masculine and feminine constructs. This also means that women are not identifiable as naval workers when attending such functions. In settings such as Balls and Cocktail parties, the military uniform is seen as more masculine and, not appropriately feminine. Whilst some women are anxious about the connotation of wearing civilian dress at naval functions, others see it as a welcome option where they can behave in more feminine ways, briefly escaping the pressure to be positioned in a masculine context. Hilsdon’s (1995) study also demonstrates this shifting of gears between masculinity and the military uniform, and femininity and civilian dress. In certain situations and for certain functions women are encouraged to take on the civilian, feminine mode, by dressing "appropriately" feminine. This is also linked to what Ford (1995) regards from an historical viewpoint as the anxieties surrounding lesbianism in the military. For some RAN women such anxieties are very much evident today where the lesbian is still viewed as the masculine woman. To dress in the masculine mode is to run the risk of being tagged lesbian. Yet as we have seen, for other women presenting in sexually ambiguous ways is also used as a strategy.

The interview data show that uniform change in itself does not bring about greater gender equity. Unlike men, women are able to choose the uniform they will wear. However, this in itself reinforces the male/female binary. Thus, women who choose the "masculine" uniform are butch and unfeminine and conversely those who choose the "feminine" uniform are positioned within ideal constructs of femininity which are also limiting. An outcome is that women are held responsible for the labels attached to their choices. Whilst women use uniform in varying ways to negotiate their workplace settings and their positions within these settings, such negotiations are strategies for survival rather than initiatives towards greater social change. It is not simply the presence of women, or the changes in uniform style, nor the choices women make in relation to the uniform worn which bring an end to discrimination.

ACC commodating Sexual Violence

Ignoring sexual violence

Rubin and Borgers (1992) state that the most commonly used strategy in dealing with sexual harassment is to ignore the perpetrator. Summrall and Taylor’s (1992) work gives numerous examples of women who ignore incidents of sexual harassment rather than confront it directly. Marylou Hadditt
(1993, 98), an American writer, states, “Only once in my forty years of working did I fight back.” Similarly Rowena Harris (1992, 105), an Australian train driver, said of a fellow worker who had poked a radio between her legs, “I wished I had kicked him in the face ... but I didn’t, I tried to pretend it never happened.”

Some women in the Navy demonstrate this same tendency to ignore incidents of sexual harassment. Often there are few other options available to them than to ignore and try to avoid the perpetrator. To “make a fuss” is to jeopardise possible promotions, postings, respect from other colleagues, and upset the sense of equilibrium within the system. More importantly, to draw attention to sexual harassment spotlights women as “other” in the masculinist culture of the RAN. Felicity, a Sub-Lieutenant, discusses an on-going experience of sexual harassment at the Australian Defence Force Academy when she was a cadet:

Felicity: I felt that I was pretty powerless about all that. If you did anything about it you got more flack from the guys. In the end if you spoke up it would just turn all the guys against you. There were some people who tried to do something [about sexual harassment]. One girl I remember, put in a complaint but she was completely ostracised after that ... The guys started to call her names.

K.A.: What kinds of names?

Felicity: Oh, like “squid” [a term used to describe women cadets making particular reference to their genitalia] which at ADFA is a real insult. We had a recreational room and if she went in there [the guys] would throw spoons at her, I mean it was blatant....

Susan and Liz, both Leading Seaman, similarly coped with sexual harassment by ignoring and avoiding their harassers as much as possible. Susan’s way of managing her situation was to keep matters to herself and wait for the harasser eventually to get another posting:

Susan: When I was 18 years old I was only an Able Seaman, a Leading Seaman would put his hand on my knee and talk about cucumbers, or what his wife did to him sexually. You know the sort of thing I mean. I was really scared because he was senior to me, and I knew that if I said anything he would have the backing of all the senior sailors. There is no way that my word would have been believed against his.

One night I got really scared, he put the hard word on me. At the time I found it really stressful, because you don’t know what to say or do. These bastards really can intimidate you. Anyway eventually he left and I never had to work with him again.

In later years, however, she learned the strategy of personal confrontation and found this worked especially with members of the same or lower rank than herself:

Susan: In later years I saw this happening to another [woman] Leading Seaman. He [the harasser] was also a Leading Seaman and would touch all the girls on
the arse. By then I was older and wiser, it would really piss me off, so I told him to keep his hands off the WRANS.... Anyway he stopped. There were a few bastards like that who used to tell us WRANS that we were only good for rooting. I learned to stand up to them and would tell them to piss off. If you stand up for yourself then they leave you alone, and start treating you like one of the guys.

To make an issue of sexual harassment is to run the risk of further violation. Avoiding, ignoring and relying on postings to remedy bad situations shows the limits of dealing with sexual harassment through official channels. Whilst sexual harassment legislation is supposed to protect women, such legislation needs to be understood in relation to workplace cultures. If women believe that reporting sexual harassment or violence will have a negative impact on their work situation they are less likely to utilise official channels to address their grievances.

**Trying to overcome the sexually limiting culture**

Feminist writers (Cockburn 1991; Cohn 1993; Pringle 1995) have explored the ways in which women in conventional male workplaces emulate typical masculine behaviour. Pringle, for example, argues that in the legal profession “forms of argument and legal authority are so fundamentally gendered that women must face obstacles unless they can switch entirely into the masculine mode. You have to be one of the “chaps” to succeed” (1994, 212).

In the Navy, one way of behaving like a man is to become one of the “lads” or a “good hand.” In Navy colloquialism, calling someone a “good hand” denotes respect for that person. Usually a “good hand” is someone who works hard, is diligent and can be relied upon at any time. A “good hand” is someone who is well liked, who can joke at the appropriate time, can provide support when support is required and who doesn’t complain in the face of adversity, or daily boredom. A “good hand” is brave and courageous and someone everyone likes to have around them. For sailors and officers alike being regarded by others as a “good hand” is one of the highest compliments possible. A “good hand” is a good bloke, a man’s man. Hence, for a woman to be called a “good hand” is an indication of acceptance, of being one of the lads, of having earned men’s respect. The female version of the good hand denotes a woman who accepts the masculinist culture for what it is, who does not groan in the face of sexism, who will laugh at sexist jokes, and will endorse the maxim, boys will be boys. For some women being recognised as a “good hand” is a strategy they use to carve out a space for themselves in an environment that otherwise excludes them or sexually objectifies them.

During an interview with nine male stokers it became evident that women’s acceptance in the mess depends on whether or not they are considered to be “good hands.” The stokers describe one woman nicknamed “Knobs,” because of her voluptuous breasts, as a “good hand” because she is not daunted or
visibly shocked by the male culture to which she is exposed in their mess. Knobs, is thought to be a lesbian, but some think that she is bi-sexual. She is held in great esteem by the men in the lower deck and is respected for being able to hold her own, particularly when it comes to drinking with the men. She is valued for her willingness to laugh with the "lads," and accept their male culture. The male mess members feel that they do not need to curb their sexist behaviour around Knobs, for she accepts them as they are and, according to the men, even revels in it. She is indeed "a good hand" and this has won Knobs much respect among her male peers. For example, Wayne and Don both Leading Seamen, describe her in the following way:

Wayne: Yeah, but Knobs wouldn't scream sexual harassment like the others [women]. She's one of the guys. One of the guys always lays on his bed with his hand on his old fella and she walks on in. No one minds Knobs.

Don: She has to cut her swearing down 'cause she is pretty bad. She's been told to stop saying the "c" word which she is trying to do. When she first joined the ship she was over the top. It was "c" this, "c" that, more than any guy ever does. A guy might slip it out every now and then. If he is around guys and if he sees a girl there he will say, "Oh I didn't mean that." But Knobs when she came on board said "c" this, "c" that. She has stopped it altogether now. Occasionally it will slip out.

In this instance, Knobs seems to have accommodated to the male culture without necessarily modifying it. She does not seem to mind gestures of violence with sexual overtones and is thus accepted by the men. She seems to get around the problem of sexual harassment by inviting it or at least playing along with it.

Cynthia, a Sub-Lieutenant, on a navigational course, found herself consciously adopting the "male mode" of operating whilst on the Bridge. Cynthia has no doubt that what she was doing was a conscious decision on her part to get alongside the men which would hopefully lead to some acceptance, and future success:

Cynthia: You're always the odd one out. There's a level of acceptance but it's never as total as with your peers. Say there were two people new to a team, me and a male, the level of acceptance by my peers for the male would be higher than for me. But the minute you try to be a female as well as work in the environment it just doesn't work.... I mean like you were talking about strategies and that ... one of the biggest ones that it seems is to become like a guy, and so many of us are, it's really sad to see it.

Cynthia is aware that taking on the dominant masculine values and mores of the culture is about accepting and, therefore, not challenging the work culture. Because of the dissonance between womanhood and military service, women place a great deal of pressure on themselves and on each other to take on the masculine approach to work. Women are performing juggling acts by accepting masculine traits characterised by aggression, independence, objectivity, dominance, competitiveness and decisiveness and at the same
time trying to remain “female.” This pressure to conform to and valorise the masculine emanates from women as well as men:

Cynthia: You don’t end up challenging anything ... because you’ve become part of it, and you know they [other women] are as guilty as them [men] trying to make, like, another female who is not taking on that sort of persona, look like a jerk. They’re going to be as guilty as the guys when they turn around and belittle [other women’s] comments, or their feelings for being, you know, stupid or whatever they say at the time. And like, I have seen it happen, I have seen girls tell other girls that they’re being stupid, they’re being over-sensitive, don’t be a wuss, don’t be this and, you know, nullifying the idea that they were right in the first place, just so they keep quiet. I suppose I did it as well. It was all part of fitting in, of getting through the day as a survivor. Yeah and sometimes that meant treading on the other females just so you can survive.

There is no doubt that womanhood and “femininity” in the RAN in the view of these Navy women is problematic. Dominant notions of masculinity, such as rationality and task orientation, position men more favourably within the Navy context than women. This demonstrates that organisations are not gender neutral, but heavily biased towards masculinist traits (Hearne and Parkin 1988; Stivers 1993). It is no wonder then, that Navy women try to overcome such a sexually limiting culture.

**As whores and ladies**

Two of the women interviewed spoke of having sexual exchanges with the men under whom they worked. These women, who were both skilled and dedicated to their work, found that in themselves these characteristics were not enough to secure promotion or enhance job opportunities. Initiating, acquiescing in, or accommodating their bosses sexual requests by sleeping with them, is a way of getting ahead in a work sphere which limits women’s access to higher positions. Juanita, a middle-ranking officer, spoke of having sex with her boss when she was a Lieutenant in order to secure her promotion:

Juanita: I didn’t start out doing it on purpose, but when I was a Lieutenant, I was given the come-on by one of the —— [boss]. Initially I was taken aback, but he started to make me some promises so I guess I began to see it as a way forward. I think other girls do the same. In fact, I know they do. Often those of us who are really ambitious and know we can’t just get ahead in the same way as the guys, will give in to it. I feel ashamed in some ways but the system makes you do it.

K.A: It sounds as though you don’t believe people get promoted on merit alone?

Juanita: I used to believe that, but I had to work my bum off, get nothing in return to realise it doesn’t work that way. I know I am a good naval officer, and I know I do good work, but sometimes that’s not enough and it hurts when you do all this work, long hours, weekends etc. and you don’t get rewarded for it. It’s true when they say, “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” It’s true for the guys as well. I mean lots of promotions happen with guys who are pretty
thick, look at some of the Commodores and Admirals for instance, but they have a good friend looking out for them who is quite senior. For females, it's often a case of using sex to clinch the deal if you like.... The only thing is that when other women find out or they suspect then they aren't going to like you much. They see you as a whore, selling out, cheap. But you're not, you're just making the most of an unfair situation.

The story of Susan, a junior sailor, substantiated Juanita's claims. She said:

Susan: I was sick of my life in Canberra. My father had died and I wanted to get to Sydney to be closer to my mother and my little brother. Mum wasn't coping well on her own and I knew my brother was being a handful. I suppose I felt guilty for being away from them and wanted to get home and see them more. Anyway, the Chief Petty Officer in charge of me had this thing where, I knew he really liked me. He'd brush himself against me at work. It was pretty gross really. Anyway when this Sydney job came up, I asked if he would recommend my posting. He said he'd think about it. A few days later, he said, "What's the Sydney job worth to you?" I said, "I don't know what you mean," even though I did know exactly what he meant. Then he just came out with it, "If you suck my cock then I'll recommend you get posted." I agreed as long as he gave me the recommendation in my hand when I did what he wanted.

I felt trapped, I mean, maybe I could go to a Chaplain or something for their support and recommendation, but I needed to get the recommendation as soon as I could so that I wouldn't miss out on the job. I could only get it from my boss, and unfortunately he was a real sleaze bag.... I know other girls who do the same.

By stating that other women do the same as herself, Susan is able to rationalise her behaviour. A number of women spoke of colleagues who, like Susan, use their sexuality as a means of winning favours and attaining promotions. Some women are critical of such strategies while others like Linda, a senior officer, are more sympathetic:

Linda: I think women often, both consciously and unconsciously, rely on the fact that they are females to try and get their own way. I suppose maybe that is because of the way they have been brought up in a society that tells them these are the ways that you can go about influencing people. They use that a lot, that is, play on the fact that they are females.

I know a lot of the people that I have met through the Navy and through ADFA, a lot of females who held appointments would certainly use the fact that they are females to get that sort of thing and not be ashamed of it either.

Linda's account demonstrates the way in which unstated assumptions about women's sexual conduct at work are constantly being made. Women's sexuality is always noticed. As Gutek (1989, 60) points out, women's sexuality is viewed as "normal, natural, and an outgrowth of being female." Linda's account also suggests why this discourse of women as sex objects encompasses the notion that women use sex to manipulate men and manipulate the "system." Another woman who expressed sympathy for junior officers who are often
cornered into sleeping with their bosses is Brenda, a Lieutenant. She sees these women as having little choice if they want to get “ahead,” especially when their bosses are powerful:

Brenda: You probably know about the —— and —— his Lieutenant, that is a classic case. I mean I was only thinking about that a couple of days ago. That particular relationship has gone on for a long time. It is also a very unlikely relationship on the face of things. This girl’s very attractive and certainly very sexy and all the rest of it. The [senior officer] involved is nothing to look at, he is short, bald, old and fat. She on the other hand is really attractive. I mean what chance would she have, unless she really was brave and said, “Rack off, I’m not going to work for this senior officer because he just wants to get into my pants.”
To me it would seem that she doesn’t have too many choices available if she wants to stay in the Navy and have promotions etc.

While some Navy women use sex as a tool for negotiating advancements, others discursively position themselves in various “feminine” ideal types. Thus, it is understandable that there is diversity amongst RAN women in their view of “femininity” and its usefulness in accommodating sexual violence in the workplace. For some female personnel, “femininity” is regarded as a trap which prevents them from negotiating equal status with men in a tough work environment. For others, it is seen as something to be valued and protected at all costs in an environment which privileges male characteristics and seeks to rob female personnel of their womanhood.

Femininity does not, however, mean one thing and indeed its meaning shifts within various contexts. Women find ways of subverting and disrupting their subordination by positioning themselves within various ideal “feminine” types whether they position themselves as ultra-feminine or whether they take on more male characteristics. In the RAN women’s narratives there is a clear demonstration of the disparity between women and men’s organisational realities. As Sheppard (1989) points out, women achieving in male work spheres experience their workplaces differently from men. The data indicates that in a male-dominated culture such as the RAN femininity is problematic and women face the challenge of “managing” their femaleness in order to negotiate a legitimate place for themselves (Gutek 1989; Stivers 1993). This they do with a measure of success given their difficult work environment.

INTERVENTIONS

EEO strategies

Women’s use of sex as a means of advancement is linked to broader issues related to definitions of skill, and promotional prospects, both of which are heavily biased towards men. Women in the RAN do not carry the same status as men Studies which explore EEO and “Comparative Worth” programs (Salaman 1986; Walby 1988; Acker 1989; Burton 1991, 1996) document reasons why such programs fall short of meeting expected outcomes. The
overwhelming evidence suggests that women are discursively positioned in subordinate roles because they are not accorded the same value as men through work appraisals. The embeddedness of women’s subordination in the workplace results in the situation where their subordination is not easily overcome with programs which seek to broaden their employment opportunities.

Commentators (Walshok 1981; Donaldson 1991) have demonstrated that when it comes to managing gender at work, women are less likely to use formal strategies available through EEO legislation than the other strategies discussed in this last section. The formal avenues for dealing with sexual harassment will be discussed along with the negativity which frequently accompanies this approach. The SWAN incident and Dr Carole Wheat’s attempts to use formal channels is viewed differently by RAN women. Some RAN women, in particular those who had experienced forms of sexual harassment, admired Carole Wheat’s courage in doing what they felt unable to do. This was not, however, the case with all the women I interviewed. Some female personnel were of the opinion that formal complaints jeopardise promotion prospects and future postings. Their responses indicate a perception of the Navy as a lads” culture which EEO legislation does little to challenge.

At the time of the interviews, which were conducted prior to, during and after the Senate Inquiry, many women did not view formal channels of intervention as a viable option. In many ways women feel that the attention given to gender and sexual harassment in the Navy with the Good Working Relationship Program (GWRP) is having negative repercussions for women, particularly women on board ships and in other non-conventional female workplaces. These sentiments are expressed in the following ways:

K.A: In dealing with workplace harassment have you used any of the Services now available such as Operation Lifeguard?

Mary: Well they didn’t exist prior to the Senate Inquiry. I didn’t ring Operation Lifeguard but I did speak to a Captain who had a lot to do with the Senate Inquiry. I ended up talking to him for about an hour.... At HMAS —— I nearly put in a complaint against someone. I spoke to my DO [Divisional Officer] who was a female, and she gave me some good advice which helped me in that case. In a lot of other cases the only thing that helped was the fact that I had short postings because of my training. It was easy because I guess I knew that I was out of there before my morale was completely destroyed.

... I still think that a lot of the females would rather put up with it [harassment], not because they enjoy it, but because it is the easier option. I think that most females feel that they will come out worse off if they make a complaint, even with the Senate Inquiry and the gender awareness seminars.

Similarly, some women consider that formal complaint regarding sexual harassment questions their sense of loyalty to the Navy generally, and to their work colleagues. Loyalty is a value which features prominently in the military and members view it as integral to survival during times of peace and war.
Cockburn (1991, 143) argues that the real test of anti-discrimination and sexual harassment laws in organisations "is over the encouragement given or not given to women to bring cases of complaint against men and the action taken to discipline those who are found to be offenders."

It is evidenced in the data presented that using formal channels for dealing with sexual harassment is often negatively met. Responses vary from lack of interest to inciting further male aggression towards women. When direct confrontation fails, some Navy women are forced to resort to other strategies. One such strategy is resigning from the RAN. This is a decision many regret having to make.

**Solidarity or resignation**

Some RAN women consider that turning to other women for support is an important survival strategy for managing their day-to-day lives in the Navy. Mary, a Lieutenant, saw this as important not only for herself but for all women:

Mary: I guess that's another strategy, that you find women along the way, I mean you're not using formal channels but you find people along the way that you can actually talk to but that doesn't actually change the situation, it's a way of coping I guess, a way of getting through ... I guess it's sort of trying to make yourself feel like you're not the only one, getting a bit of collective bonding going, almost just like unions, isn't it.

This has, however, been easier for some than for others. Women in traditionally feminised workplaces have a greater chance at meeting other women of similar rank. In the Navy women are often isolated from one another, working in areas where they may be the only woman or, the only woman of a particular rank. This is particularly so for senior women officers, who suffer from isolation in terms of geographical location, and workplaces generally. Thus it is difficult for them to network with other senior females, informally or formally, on a regular basis. Given their rank, they are discouraged from forming networks with women junior to themselves.

Women on ships experience a similar vulnerability. A Navigator, for instance, may be the only woman working on the Bridge. Or she may be put in charge of training a female Sub-Lieutenant, junior to her. The argument is that in times of war the chain of command must operate as a tight sequence of authority. Friendships between junior and senior members are seen to interfere in the hierarchy of command by creating a conflict of interest. Hence whilst it is acceptable to form close bonds and friendships amongst those of similar rank this is unacceptable outside one's rank.

It is in this milieu of isolation that women find themselves most vulnerable, particularly in their experiences of day-to-day sexism, sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence. Brenda, a senior officer, illustrates this point clearly:
Brenda: Well I’ve been in nearly twenty years. Overall I have found that it’s been very good and I’ve had a very good career. One thing I have found is that there is little support from other women, for women like me. I guess because there have been so few of us. Even though others have been around they have been in other areas.

I was having lunch with a female Wing Commander who was about to leave the Air Force because her husband had a posting. She was saying, “We should have done this years ago, we should have sat down and had lunch. You know, why have we just soldiered on by ourselves!” I don’t think we have really supported each other, and it’s been hard for us because there have been so few peers for us older ones who have been in for a long time.

It is evident from this perspective on the need for female companionship that women consider friendships and bonds with each other to play an important part in “getting through” their day-to-day work and surviving an often hostile environment. There can be no doubt either as to the importance of these friendships as a way to combat sexual harassment, sexual violence and sexist behaviour in the Navy. Women need to be able to seek other women out, to discuss their workplace experiences, as well as assist one another to form helpful strategies as a way of fighting sexism at work.

For some women strategies such as solidarity, confrontation, accommodation, resignation, intervention, avoidance and sex are not viable options. Elsewhere I argue that for some women leaving the Navy is linked to a realisation that their workplace is not conducive to their sense of selfhood and womanhood (Agostino 1997). Resignation for these Navy women is a strategy they use to deal with sexual harassment and sexual violence in their workplace. Samantha, a Lieutenant working as a Navigator on board a ship, decided to resign after enduring a lengthy period of continual sexual and gender harassment perpetrated by the Commanding Officer and the Executive Officer on board her ship:

Samantha: When something like this [gender and sexual harassment] happens on a ship you cannot get away. I just could not get away. I couldn’t get off the ship; and I was relying on the Commanding Officer for my report. I got a 5.6 for my PRS.7

... The hardest thing for me is the bitterness, the love of driving ships is still strong. That’s the biggest hurt. The biggest thrill of my life was driving a DDG and I guess I’ll never do that again. I guess the other thing is these two guys that did all this to me and Mary both get promoted and I am out.8

Samantha’s account shows a great deal of regret in having to resign. It is evident that this was a difficult decision to make particularly given that she enjoyed her work as a navigator. The implementation of such a strategy shows the difficulty women face in the Navy and how damaging sexual harassment is in terms of women’s continued careers in the Service.

A number of women spoke of their sense of loyalty especially when it comes to using formal channels to address gender and sexual harassment in
the workplace. Lucy, a Lieutenant, who decided to leave the Navy as a result of continued sexual harassment, said:

Lucy: You know some of these men, like there's a couple that I'd really like to say ... these people have done this, this and this. Not so that action will be taken against [them], but just that if someone else would know that this person is doing this, so I am still sort of like thinking of putting in a complaint but I'm still sort of hesitant, because I still feel like you know, oh I'm letting the big team down. I feel like I am being disloyal to the rest of the good guys.

K.A: So your sense of loyalty towards your colleagues is pretty strong?

Lucy: Yes it is, and yet the funniest thing is that I don’t feel any loyalty to those bastards, it’s just the others [males].

This sense of loyalty toward the RAN and toward work colleagues was also central to the debate as to whether Dr Wheat was justified in her official and public complaints in relation to her own experience of sexual harassment and alleged rape. Women it seems, are more likely to adjust their own behaviour rather than jeopardise their workplace relations by being “disloyal.”

CONCLUSION

The narratives illustrate that women deal with sexual harassment and sexual violence in a number of ways. First, women challenge sexism by directly confronting harassment in a particular instance or as a general approach. Women are more likely to use this strategy with harassers of the same or lower rank than themselves. Second, women may accommodate male behaviour. This takes on various forms including denying or accentuating their gendered position within the RAN culture. This may mean concurring with discourses which suggest sexual violence is brought on by the women themselves. This position emanates from women’s supposed promiscuity, drunkenness, or sexual prowess as explanations for the sexual violence they experience. Third, the narratives suggest that women may resign when all other strategies are exhausted, or when the harassment is so severe that a continued career in the RAN is no longer tolerable. This is not to say that all women who resign do so for reasons associated with the masculine environment in which they find themselves. However, for some women resignation is linked to their survival when they feel that other strategies will have little impact.

In all of the strategies for dealing with and surviving sexual harassment and sexual violence, it is clear that Navy women operate as social agents rather than as passive victims. Whether women use informal or formal channels for dealing with their grievances, they all show resilience and empowerment in their day-to-day working lives. RAN women show active resistance or at least strategic compliance as they fight their way into the masculinist culture of the Navy. Much of the literature which looks at women’s survival of sexual
harassment and sexual violence reinforces the need for women to seek out support from other women (Sumrall 1992; Bryson 1994; Eastal 1994). Gaining support from other women, disclosing and sharing experiences with one another, are steps towards empowerment for survivors.

NOTES

1 The data gathered for this project were obtained from a number of sources. A total of sixty RAN members (twenty-six women and thirty-four men) were interviewed from both sea and shore establishments. Thirty members were interviewed twice, and the remaining thirty were interviewed three times. This resulted in a total of 150 interviews, which were conducted over the period of thirty months. In addition to face-to-face interviews, data were obtained from the 122 submissions to the Senate Inquiry, which explored allegations of sexual harassment in the Royal Australian Navy. Moreover, four additional people (three women and one man) kept sea-going diaries which extended over six to twelve months. These personnel were part of the mainstream culture participating in the Navy on a full-time basis. Hence data were not obtained from reservists, or civilians in the Navy, such as social workers, psychiatrists, doctors and administrative staff.

Participant observation also became a primary source for data gathering. Whilst not able to observe RAN members directly in their work setting, I was able to attend as the wife of an RAN officer both official and unofficial social functions on board ships and ashore (ten official functions, and fifteen unofficial functions). The official functions included “Ladies Dining in Nights,” “Passing out Parades,” “Ceremonial Sunsets,” and various cocktail parties. The unofficial social functions included dinner parties and barbecues where most present were RAN members and their families; “happy hours” at wardrooms and messes; Christmas parties; and “drinks” on board various ships. After all of these social gatherings I took careful notes. I also gathered data from two main texts circulated widely in the Navy, Navy News the naval newspaper and Sea Talk a periodical put out by the Personnel Division.


3 I am using the term sexual violence to refer to mechanisms used to sexually objectify women thus maintaining unequal power relations in the workplace. Sexual violence in this sense is located on a continuum and includes all forms of sexual harassment and rape (Kelly 1988). In the workplace sexual violence is used to contain women within certain subjective positions which do not threaten male hegemony. Violence is also used here to explain the process whereby Navy men exert hegemonic masculinist discourses not just through physical force, but through attempting to impose their own cultural perspectives in everyday practices (Jones 1991).

4 It is sailors who occupy the lower deck of a ship, in contrast to officers who occupy the upper deck. In this way discourses of hierarchy are maintained spatially.

5 Operation Lifeguard provides an information and referral service to naval personnel who consider they have been subjected to, accused of, or witnessed any form of discrimination or harassment.
Five out of twenty-six women interviewed, compared to one out of thirty-four men, resigned during the course of the research for reasons which related to on-going sexual harassment or sexual violence such as rape.

A PR5 is a personal report written on officers by their superior officer. These reports have a significant bearing on promotion prospects as well as future postings. The scores are given out of nine. Scores which attract promotions are upwards of seven.

Ten months after this interview, Mary, the Lieutenant referred to here, resigned for similar reasons.

WORKS CITED


