

Standing Up To Be Counted: Female Military Personnel and Online Mentoring

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Abstract

Women working in male-dominated fields such as science and the military often encounter challenges fitting into their workplace communities, feeling themselves to be cast as less intelligent and less powerful (physically and with regard to leadership). The problems connected to gendered stereotypes do not end once female military personnel leave the military service. As a result, female veterans often downplay their skills and accomplishments and do not identify themselves with the veteran moniker. Several online communities for military women have emerged that strategically use Web 2.0 technologies to enable female military personnel to mentor each other in relatively safe electronic spaces to support the professional and personal growth of participants and to articulate personally and publicly the reasons why women, too, “count” as veterans.

Keywords: female veterans, gendered stereotypes, mentoring, online communities

Note: Some of this text is borrowed and modified from my previously published essay “Inquiring Communally, Acting Collectively: The Community Literacy of the Academy Women eMentor Portal and Facebook Group.” *Community Literacy Journal* 6.1 (Fall 2011).

Second-wave feminist Carol Hanisch wrote her 1969 essay “The Personal is the Political” as a response to social critics of the time who were dismissing the practice of women gathering together to form consciousness-raising groups as being akin to “personal therapy” or mere “gossip sessions.” In the essay, she argues that these meetings ought instead to be recognized as serious political activities with the potential to lead to real community change. Hanisch asserts that these sessions constitute a form of civic action because “personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions... there is only collective action for a collective solution.” In other words, she and other feminists saw a compelling reason for women (and some men) to consider together the personal and the social effects of prevalent stereotypes of women. Without the opportunity to form a collective consciousness, Hanisch suggested, an individual woman would have more difficulty moving beyond the personal impact of these stereotypes to the shared will in order to attempt to enact more widespread social change.

As Natalie Fixmer and Julia Wood explain in their 2005 essay “The Personal is Still Political: Embodied Politics in Third Wave Feminism,” personal forms of female resistance are often still regarded as “mere lifestyles choices or politically ineffectual obsessions with individual locations, circumstances, and preferences” (236). However, as Fixmer and Wood recognize, personal forms of resistance can become more politically effectual when individual women come together in communities to talk with each other, to form coalitions, and to find voice.

The personal and collective problems connected to gendered stereotypes such as those Hanisch identified in 1969 (and thus the need for change) are still fairly pervasive in the predominately male workplace of the United States military service. Kayla Williams’s *Love My Rifle More than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army* imparts her vexing experiences as a linguist in the Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Williams was also interviewed for a recent Atlantic article focusing on the military’s “bro” culture, a culture that high-ranking male officers acknowledge, too. Robert H. Scales, retired Army major general, and former commandant of the Army War College, for example, recently spoke up about military culture and the fact that “[t]he rank and file have yet to accept women into their community. Women have fought and died in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are no longer excluded from combat zones. But the military has yet to fully accept women or their contributions.” Part of this continuing problem, according to Anu Bhagwati, female veteran and Executive Director of the Service Women’s Action Network, is that we “have all partaken in and fed off, consciously or not, the exploitative, voyeuristic and pornographic industry that fetishizes women with weapons and exploits or victimizes military women. . . . As a society, we are more obsessed and concerned with what sexualized women do with machine guns than what empowered women could do with actual political power.”

The problems connected to gendered stereotypes do not end once female military personnel leave the military service, either. As Tranette Ledford explains, “Many women returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan, even those with hard skills and a security clearance, are facing a new battle on the home front: a job market rife with obstacles inherent in being female and a military veteran.” Fortunately, Ledford has found that “[t]he good news is that organizations are growing in numbers and scope as women veterans increasingly turn to themselves to find solutions and break barriers.”

Previous research on female scientists shows that having access to female mentors with whom other women in male-dominated workplaces could share and deliberate about their problems resulted in their increased ability to express their views publicly among their male colleagues, which thereby increased their personal job satisfaction and mitigated the impact of negative stereotypes within their personal and professional lives (Settles et al). Research also shows that mentored individuals report having “greater satisfaction, career mobility and opportunity, recognition, and a higher promotion rate than nonmentored individuals” (Bierema and Merriam 213).

Some efforts are being made to create face-to-face mentoring for female military personnel, such as Female-2-Female, an on-post Army program “to combat isolation and encourage the expansion of female soldiers’ networks.” According to a report in *The Army Times*, while the program “had a worthy goal, to connect female soldiers on the post — and it featured two high-powered female flag officers who talked about balancing work and life in a male-dominated Army,” a backlash resulted in complaints that the event was “too ‘June Cleaver’ and not enough ‘G.I. Jane’”—that it “was for housewives, not soldiers” (Gould).

Increasingly, female military personnel are going online to seek mentoring opportunities, in part because military women typically have limited numbers of other women within their immediate commands (their local worksites) with whom they feel comfortable discussing such issues or from whom they feel it would be appropriate to seek personal and professional advice. Even if a woman in the military has a senior female colleague in her local workplace from whom she can seek advice, perceptions of favoritism within such a mentoring relationship can be a concern for both mentor and protégé. As Raymond Noe, David Greenberger, and Sheng Wang point out in their article “Mentoring: What We Know and Where We Might Go,” such perceptions can “give rise to suspicion, jealousy, and even resentment in employees who are not involved in a mentoring relationship” (140). The ability to receive advice and mentoring from another female military member who is not in the protégé’s immediate chain-of-command through online communities such as the Academy Women eMentor portal, the Academy Women Facebook group, and the Service: When Women Come Marching Home Facebook group, therefore, can be one way to reap the benefits of mentoring while avoiding some of the local workplace challenges. In addition, social networks “enable their members to contribute to, and pull from, the network to accomplish more than the sum of the parts would indicate” and therefore, “increase professional success” by acting as “platforms for the exchange and promotion of information and ideas, [thereby] accelerating [members’] acquisition of skills and knowledge.”

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