



Quick-Look Report: USMC.2017.0005

Researcher Insights from the Marine Corps  
Organizational Culture Research Project:  
**Marines' Perspectives on Marines United  
Misconduct and the Everyday Experiences of  
Women in the USMC**

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## About the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project

### What is MCOCR?

The MCOCR Project is a small, exploratory, qualitative research effort intended to gather Marine perspectives on a range of issues related to Marine Corps culture. The project resulted in 150 semi-structured interviews and 32 semi-structured focus groups with 267 unique participants (nine Marines participated in both an interview and a focus group). All participants were volunteers, and the project was conducted under a protocol approved by the Marine Corps Human Research Protection Program. The project was conducted under Marine Corps University's academic freedom policy.

### How should the information in this report be used?

Because of the non-representative sample, data and analysis from MCOCR are intended to inform discussions in conjunction with other information sources. They should not be used to make broad claims about Marines or Marine Corps programs and policies.

### Were Marine statements fact-checked?

No. The intent of the project was to gather Marine perspectives without regard to whether the perspectives were based on full knowledge of current Marine Corps policies and programs. In some cases, it was important to capture misperceptions, as they have implications for internal Marine Corps messaging.

### What are the project's limitations?

1. The MCOCR sample was not designed to be representative of the Marine Corps population in terms of sex, race/ethnicity, MOS, or other characteristics. Therefore, the data cannot be used in statistical analysis designed to make claims about all Marines. Sample demographics are included in the March 2018 report from the project, available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/AD1079774>.
2. The project did not include reservists or recently retired/separated Marines due to Marine Corps interpretation of DoD guidance on information collections at the time the research was designed.
3. We did not actively seek volunteers above E-8s and O-5s; therefore, the senior voice is not strong in the sample.

### Who funded and sponsored the project?

The project falls within the normal scope of work of CAOCL's Translational Research Group (TRG), and the majority of the project was funded out of CAOCL's existing budget. Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) requested that the research be done, but the research design, conduct, and analysis were controlled by TRG. M&RA provided assistance with logistics, travel for research team members who were not part of CAOCL, and funding to accelerate transcription of audio recordings.

### When and where were data gathered?

Between August and October 2017, the research team gathered data at the following locations: Pentagon, MCB Quantico, MCB Camp Lejeune, MCAS Cherry Point, MCB Camp Pendleton, MCAGCC 29 Palms, MCAS Yuma, and MCB Camp Butler (Okinawa).

### What are the qualifications and characteristics of the research team?

The principal investigator is a cultural anthropologist with more than 20 years of experience working with and doing research on national security organizations, including 10 years leading research teams on projects focused on the Marine Corps. The composition of the MCOCR research team has changed between 2017 and 2020, but team members have possessed graduate-level educational backgrounds in the following disciplines: cultural anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, international relations, education, communication, and evaluation science. Data gathering teams included male and female researchers. To the maximum extent possible, participants were allowed to choose the sex of the researcher with whom they interacted. All team members thus far have been Caucasian. The data gathering team included two members with Marine backgrounds. One was a recently retired field-grade Marine officer, and the other was an active duty company-grade Marine officer. The research team also consulted with other social scientists and Marines during design and analysis.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

### Report Purpose

This report was developed in response to a request for a “quick-look” product highlighting preliminary researcher insights on a subset of topics to inform thinking at the Personnel Studies and Oversight Office. It focuses on insights related to three issues:

1. What Marines say about the Marines United-related misconduct.
2. The experiences and perspectives of female Marines on picture sharing and online commenting as well as Marines’ thoughts on how the Marine Corps is handling such issues.
3. Some of the everyday challenges faced by women in the Marine Corps.

### Key Limitations

The information presented here:

- Includes researcher insights based on fieldwork and preliminary work with the data, *not* structured, formal (i.e., systematic) analysis, which will be conducted over the coming months.
- Is a very small subset of the issues addressed in the MCOCR Project.
- Is drawn from an exploratory project that was designed to gather perspectives on a wide range of issues rather than to draw firm conclusions on a small set of topics or ensure representativeness.

The TRG team selected insights and illustrative Marine statements that speak to the specific issues being addressed in this report. Neither the insights nor the statements are intended to represent the full range of Marines’ perspectives on these issues. In later analytic work, the team plans to address the range of perspectives provided on a number of different topics.

Some, perhaps many, of the Marine perspectives and researcher insights provided in this report will be confirmatory to readers knowledgeable about the topics. While the team expects further analysis may yield more unexpected results, they believe the confirmatory nature of some of the information provided in this report is indicative of the depth of the issues at hand.

The purpose of this project is to provide Marine perspectives, and the team has tried to avoid censoring the Marines’ views in this report. Some Marines may have expressed perspectives that are not supported by facts and/or turn out not to be substantiated in later analysis. Inclusion of a particular perspective does not necessarily indicate acceptance or endorsement by TRG.

### Top Level Takeaways

#### **Simple or crisis-mode solutions are not the right approach.**

The experiences of male and female Marines related to bias and online misconduct are entangled with many other issues such as trust, respect, inclusion, messaging, and leadership. Also, the

perspectives of both male and female Marines on these issues are wide ranging and cannot be easily categorized along lines of sex, race, age, or other factors. The Marine Corps needs to invest in long term, deliberative strategies and assessments.

**Messaging remains a challenge.**

Marines described many experiences of mixed messages (perhaps unintentional) from senior leaders. They also described many situations in which senior leader messaging was undermined or contradicted by the behavior of more junior leaders and peers.

**Marines want to be part of the solutions.**

Regardless of personal perspectives and experiences, the vast majority of male and female Marine participants in this research are engaged, ready, and eager to be part of the solutions to any challenges the Marine Corps faces.

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## Introduction: Marines United and “the Problem”

In response to the March 2017 Marines United Facebook misconduct, General Robert Neller in his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee stated,

I've gone personally, as all of my leaders have gone, and spoken to literally tens of thousands of Marines and made them understand what their responsibilities are and I think more importantly . . . the social media things that we've seen have been — were just indicative of a problem within our culture that we did not properly respect or value the contributions of women in our Corps and that's the problem we have to fix.<sup>1</sup>

To explore the problem within Marine Corps culture, Manpower and Reserve Affairs requested that the Translational Research Group at Marine Corps University's Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning conduct qualitative research aimed at gathering the experiences and perspectives of Marines.<sup>2</sup> The research focused on three broad topics – social cohesion, gender bias, and leadership – and allowed Marines to take the conversation where they needed it to go to provide senior leadership their experiences and perceptions on these issues. Researchers spoke with 266 individual Marines through 150 interviews and 32 focus groups in the National Capital Region (MCB Quantico and Pentagon), MCB Camp Lejeune, MCAS Cherry Point, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, MCAS Yuma, MCB Camp Pendleton, and locations in Okinawa.<sup>3</sup>

What follows are initial researcher insights after having completed data collection and prior to systematic data analysis.<sup>4</sup> This document is being developed and delivered in advance of the preliminary report at the request of the Personnel Studies and Oversight Office. In this document, researchers focus on three distinct but highly related topics:

1. What Marines say about the Marines United misconduct.
2. The experiences and perspectives of female Marines on picture sharing and online commenting as well as Marines' thoughts on how the Marine Corps is handling such issues.
3. Some of the everyday challenges faced by women in the Marine Corps.

In detailing the diversity of topics Marines brought up when talking about Marines United, this report demonstrates how the problem exceeds misconduct on social media, and that, in regard to the misconduct itself, sexually explicit pictures are only part of the issue. Women also had to deal with hurtful comments on pictures in which they were fully clothed and doing ordinary

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Mitchell, “Court-martial possible in Marines nude photo sharing misconduct,” 15 June 2017, <http://thehill.com/news-by-subject/defense-homeland-security/338035-court-martial-possible-in-marines-nude-photo>, accessed 6 February 2018.

<sup>2</sup> This research was conducted under Human Subjects Protection Protocol USMC.2017.0005. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual speakers and researchers and do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Marine Corps or Davis Defense Group. To improve flow for the reader, researchers have removed filled pauses (e.g. um, uh) that were deemed to have minimal impact on the integrity of the transcript. Brackets are used in the text to add clarity, represent short text removals, and indicate paralinguistic, e.g. sighs and laughs.

<sup>3</sup> Basic demographic information on participants, such as rank, sex, and MOS, are available on request.

<sup>4</sup> Researcher insights were formed in the process of data collection and in the subsequent informal review of interview and focus group transcripts. Insights were recorded in memos after each interview and focus group as well as in the personal field journals of researchers. Systematic data analysis of all transcripts using qualitative analysis software will be undertaken at a later date.

Marine activities. The third section of the report thus offers a look at the everyday challenges with which women contend. If Marines United and other incidents are indicative of a culture that “does not properly respect or value the contributions of women,” then the ordinary experiences that normalize this environment of disrespect warrant attention.

## **PART 1: What do Marines Think about Marines United?**

How Marines discussed Marines United was influenced to some degree by what they and the researchers were discussing at the time the topic arose. When asked about whether this is a unique problem for the Marine Corps or the military in general, **many Marines talked about the problem as one that plagues American society more broadly, not as one that is specific to the organization. Some suggested, however, that within the Corps, this societal problem is exacerbated by the demographics.** One female major explained,

It is a society-at-large problem. The Marine Corps is a microcosm of society. It's a skewed microcosm, where we are 93% men, 7% women. And what you have is a whole bunch of dudes who again we talked about the type of folk who view women as a threat because of their perception – which comes from society – that if a woman can do what they can do, somehow they're less masculine. So Marines United was born of that, and you have some of that mob, mob mentality where nobody says anything because nobody else is saying anything.<sup>5</sup>

Another example comes from a male captain, who combined the societal perspective with the argument that “bad apples” – part of the 10% that Marines routinely identified as problematic – can likely be blamed for the bulk of the misconduct.

Yeah, it's society as a whole, isn't it? Absolutely. 'Cause everybody's taking their little hate groups and now they put them on the internet. I mean I would venture to guess the majority of Marines at least especially the ones that were adding to it and causing it probably weren't your most stellar Marines, obviously. And obviously they had some character flaws and issues 'cause I mean revenge porn just seems to be a more common charge that we're giving Marines these days partly 'cause it's more accessible to do it.<sup>6</sup>

The captain's comment also addresses the aspect of technology. **Some Marines suggested that Marines' misconduct towards women is not a new problem at all, but that new technology provides a more visible and accessible platform for an old issue.** A male major explained,

Easy answer is, it was always there. They've just found a common forum where they were [*inaudible*], right? If someone's going to be racist in their shop, in a shop full of Hispanics and blacks, they're probably going to keep their fucking mouth shut. But if someone is racist online in a page full of racist- other racist people, all of a sudden, they can let their freak flag fly and make all the racist comments that they want to make.<sup>7</sup>

**But even while technology may have created a new space for an old issue, the emphasis on the technology itself (and the policies surrounding its use) is misplaced,** as a male captain explained,

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<sup>5</sup> Participant #207, Major, Interview, Pentagon, 7 September 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Participant #016, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

Speaking of the social media stuff – there’s a question I kind of have there. I read a decent editorial. It’s a short opinion piece, but it basically said, so I think a lot of the response to the Marines United stuff was, you know, policy on use of social media. It’s like, it’s not really the issue, is it? Social media is just a medium. The actions have nothing to do with social media. It was, the opinion piece was like, how is this the response like that we need a new policy on social media? It doesn't freaking matter that it was on social media. Maybe that kind of gets at that whole like, what's the messaging from the top? “Don't put that stuff on social media.” Don't think that's really the issue.<sup>8</sup>

Male Marines frequently gave speculative and analytical answers as to why they believe the Marines United misconduct occurred. Female Marines, on the other hand, often spoke from their personal experiences. Many women were unsurprised by the behavior of those on Marines United because they live out related struggles every day. This incident was only the tip of an iceberg of problems with which they have been dealing since before they earned their eagle, globe, and anchor. One female captain mentioned, “I wasn’t too terribly surprised, especially that it came from our organization.”<sup>9</sup> This sentiment was echoed by a female sergeant, “I wasn’t surprised that it happened. I was more surprised that it took so long for something like that to get highlighted because that’s been a problem like forever.”<sup>10</sup>

As will be discussed in more depth below, this issue goes further than sharing and commenting on sexually explicit photos. Multiple female Marines reported finding photos of themselves in full uniform being shared and commented on in an inappropriate manner. One female corporal explained,

It was at the beginning of the gender integration experiment, and it was just a regular picture of me and one of the girls from – it was at the school house, and you could see like the AAV in the background, and there are just all kinds of negative comments like, “They don't belong in our MOS, let alone the Marine Corps” kind of thing. And, actually, one of my crew chiefs actually posted on there, was like, “She was one of my best crewmen. She did this, that, and the other,” and actually defended me. But it was just like they can take pictures that aren't even in that kind of dirty context kind of thing and still flip it around to, you know?<sup>11</sup>

## **PART 2: Marines United as a Symptom of the Problem**

The Marines United misconduct, once publicized, put on display behaviors that seemed “not surprising” to many female Marines, as they encounter such actions in both online and interpersonal spaces. However, the ease of making personal things public through the use of social media has raised the stakes on choices Marines make in personal relationships. One of our participants, a female lance corporal,<sup>12</sup> said her Marine ex-boyfriend posted a photograph of her along with her name and barracks address, prompting harassment from others. From this experience, she concluded that she and other women should be more careful of what photos they

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<sup>8</sup> Participant #105 (Capt E), Captain, Officer Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Participant #235, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Participant #273, Sergeant, Interview, Okinawa, 19 October 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Participant #040, Corporal, Sgt and Below Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Participant #060, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

take and send, while men should have integrity when it comes to receiving photographs in trust. When it comes to sexually explicit images on social media sites, this lance corporal and other Marines attributed responsibility to both men and women.

In addition, other women had firsthand experiences like the corporal quoted at the end of Part 1. That is, they too had been photographed in uniform while they were performing regular Marine activities. These pictures were also posted to the same or similar online sites and received rude and disrespectful comments. In these instances, the women were unaware that the photograph existed and, therefore, had no control over where or when it was posted. Furthermore, the photograph itself was of a professional activity, but the comments tended to be personal and insulting.

For example, two enlisted female Marines were photographed in their Charlies. One was decorated with a Purple Heart. Their photo was turned into a meme with the caption “here’s a list of the sandwiches you’re going to make.”<sup>13,14</sup> Another female was photographed in boots and utilities while participating in a three-legged race on a Marine field day. One of the comments under this photograph called her the “beer gut blonde.”<sup>15</sup> In another example, an enlisted male<sup>16</sup> who works with several female sergeants said their unit was videoed while attending a memorial ceremony for a Marine who was murdered. He continued, “So, someone took a screen grab from that memorial video of this fallen Marine. Then put [it] on a page, like, ‘Hey, check out the tits on this one,’” referencing one of the female sergeant attendees.

Online insults are not limited to photographs or videos of women. One staff sergeant observed how a news story about a male Marine’s misconduct can become a forum for insulting women in the comments thread. Referencing the online response to the colonel convicted of molestation, “even in that forum – like everybody should be angry about what he did to that little girl, right? – somewhere in the comments there’s something about a female Marine.”<sup>17</sup>

Online disrespect presents a conundrum. Comments can be dismissed. After all, who knows if they represent what individuals really think and whether Marines or civilians have posted them? However, they also echo prior experiences and encounters female Marines have had. One female captain<sup>18</sup> described the frustration and exhaustion that have built up over her career. She, too, was photographed in her uniform and mocked online (“women should be in the kitchen”). To her, this was nothing new; her sex had been used to undermine her before. Worse was the memory of other times she was brushed off by Marine leaders. As a 2nd lieutenant, for instance, she advocated shutting down the Just the Tip of the Spear<sup>19</sup> website but was told she was being “overly sensitive.” The captain went on, “it gets tiring after a while if you’re continually proving yourself.” For her and others, these professional experiences add up.

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<sup>13</sup> “Make me a sandwich” is a phrase that is sometimes leveraged against women to imply they should stick to the domestic endeavors of traditional gender roles.

<sup>14</sup> Participant #601, Sergeant, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Participant #040 (Cpl E), Corporal, Sgt and Below Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Participant #115 (Sgt N), Sergeant, Sgt and Below Focus Group, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Participant #639, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Participant #604, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Just the Tip of the Spear, much like Marines United, started as a Facebook page where veteran and active duty Marines could share funny and supportive posts. However, some of the humor appears to denigrate female Marines.



**Women go through a series of personal deliberations about whether and how to speak up. Often, it is easier to just tolerate the behavior. Sometimes fatigue from constantly feeling compelled to defend self and others sets in. Sometimes the fear of social and career impacts silences women, and sometimes, it is just uncomfortable to discuss feelings of marginalization.** One officer<sup>20</sup> said she was uncomfortable discussing what it is like for women in the military even with her husband, who is also a Marine, which is why she surprised herself when she finally spoke passionately in front of her peers in a PME setting during a spontaneous discussion the director of the school led after the Marines United story broke. Her colleagues explained the misconduct away as immature behavior, symptomatic of “kids these days.” The officer said this interpretation hurt her, and she cut them off, saying,

It's not a millennial using social media. It goes against the very core of what we're made of, why we serve, why we die, die for each other. Like how, ... those men that posted those things about women on Marines United stole their honor from them. I mean they took from them something that they can never get back, while they were just – already in a situation that – it's already hard being a woman in the Marine Corps.

Because this officer was so accustomed to keeping her emotions in check, she was unsure of how her colleagues would react. She did not expect that a combat arms officer would later tell her that her statement made him “change the way I'm going to lead in the future.” This is a potential success story in how leadership may use misconduct to generate discussion among men and women. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that open conversations like these are easy to come by or will always yield such positive results. This officer repeatedly attributed her compulsion to speak up as well as her colleague's response to her statement to the *trust* they had built up through the academic debates they had had throughout the year. **Unfortunately, trust is delicate and a hard thing to build in an organization that sends both subtle and overt messages that women do not belong.** These messages are explored in more depth in Part 3.

When it came to how leadership was tackling the issue of online misconduct, Marines discussed the response at both the level of senior leadership and the unit leadership level. Many Marines thought senior leadership was on the right track or doing what it could “from above.” They discussed the various tools (Page 11s, training, education, etc.) and their relative effectiveness. One female Marine thought the Commandant nailed it in his brief. “He said it himself when he came down here like, ‘men, stop being fucking dirty men.’ He said it himself, ‘like stop doing that shit.’”<sup>21</sup>

However, several Marines expressed concerns about the sincerity of the efforts. One colonel referred to the use of Page 11s as a “cover your ass”<sup>22</sup> measure. One female gunnery sergeant thought the Marine Corps' willingness to talk about these issues was a good step but questioned, **But is it genuine or is it disingenuous? You know what I mean? ... Do they actually care about protecting the reputation of the young women who trusted those young men with those photos? Do we care about raising the bar for the young men who are actually participating in that behavior?**<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Participant #605, Major, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Participant #234 (Sgt E), Sergeant, Sgt and Below Focus Group, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Participant #607, Colonel, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Participant #218, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

Some felt like the message, though correct, was not enough. Several Marines wanted more than words from senior leaders. As a staff sergeant<sup>24</sup> expressed, “When I saw that video, when I saw [the Commandant’s] message to the Marine Corps, like, ‘that’s, that’s it, sir? You’re just gonna tell us to be like better people?’ That’s not working.”<sup>25</sup>

Another Marine offered that she was excited that the Commandant had come to her Basic School class right after the Marines United misconduct had come to light, but she was disappointed in his response when a female peer stood up to ask him a question about how to lead and mentor in light of the issues raised in the misconduct.

I would have expected him to say something like it's important that you instill the Marine Corp values da da da da. ... I felt like she kind of threw him a softball, and he could have hit it out of the park because we wanted our male peers to see this is coming from all the way at the top. You need to instill in your Marines and in your platoons that professionalism is the most important thing. ... and he didn't do it. [*laughs*] I was like, are you serious? ... He doesn't get it. How can you fix something you don't get?<sup>26</sup>

**At the unit level, several Marines provided examples of leaders’ response that implied to them that the leadership actually was not committed to changing behavior.** For example, one female major<sup>27</sup> described how a female corporal in her unit reported to their leadership that some Marines had nude pictures of her. As a result, one Staff NCO was NJP’d and reduced in rank, but then he had his rank restored. Meanwhile, the corporal was questioned about why she took the pictures. The major felt that the enlisted woman was unduly criticized, whereas the widespread behavior of “trading images of women Marines like baseball cards” was not addressed adequately by her leadership in her opinion.

Another corporal’s experience illustrates a lack of professionalism and commitment to change in unit leadership. She recounted what she overheard from two sergeants sitting behind her in the theater while attending the I MEF sergeant major’s brief about the Marines United misconduct. She reported that the sergeants said,

Well, if they weren’t such fucking sluts and didn't send nudies to these guys and maybe we wouldn’t have these problems in the fucking first place. If you don't want people looking at your picture, then why the fuck are you sending it out there, like of your pussy or your titties?<sup>28</sup>

**The words and actions from unit leadership in response to picture sharing and misconduct reveal the complexity of the challenge facing the Marine Corps. Messaging “from above” is sometimes ineffective in the face of explicit and implicit biases “from below.”**

<sup>24</sup> Participant #216, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

<sup>25</sup> This statement echoes concerns raised in previous TRG research projects on resilience and ethics conducted by TRG. Training that focuses on declaratives, dos and don’ts, may be insufficient for complex topics. Whether in training or in later follow-up with peers and leaders, Marines need time to practice decision-making and navigating value conflicts through discussion and scenarios. This research is available on request to the Principal Investigator.

<sup>26</sup> Participant #268, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, Interview, Okinawa, 19 October 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Participant #305, Major, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Participant #309, Corporal, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

### **PART 3: What is it like to be a Woman and a Marine?**

This section offers a glimpse into the lived experiences of female Marines and the everyday challenges that they face. Egregious wrongdoings aside<sup>29</sup>, female Marines reported that their lives are peppered with experiences that make them feel as though they are perceived and treated differently from the average male Marine. Based on researcher insights, the experiences discussed in this section seem common among the female Marine participants. Within the range of scenarios that participants provided, two perceptions of women seem to undergird the differential treatment they receive:

1. Women are a nuisance or a danger.
2. Women make inadequate Marines.

An exploration of the everyday challenges that female Marines face is important because it highlights the ingrained biases that normalize the mistreatment of women and set the stage for more serious wrongdoings – such as sexual assault and online harassment – to occur.

#### ***Early negative perceptions in recruit training***

Women conveyed that male Marines did not seem to know how to treat them. This may be because men are not used to working and socializing with female Marines. Given that the percentage of women in the Marine Corps is so low and that recruit training is segregated, it was not surprising for a woman to say that she was the only woman in her unit or for a junior enlisted man to say that he had not yet worked with a woman. But beyond the reality of sex disproportions in the Corps, several participants recounted that as recruits and junior Marines, they heard messaging from drill instructors and commanders that exacerbated the alienation of women. The message is this: women are dangerous, so stay away. **Whatever the intentions are behind this message, an outcome is that women are portrayed as “the problem” from the start.** For instance, a female 1<sup>st</sup> sergeant recalled a conversation she had with her Marine husband when they were both drill instructors. They were discussing how male drill instructors warned their recruits to stay away from female Marines, and she said, “Why would you tell the recruits to stay away from women? Why? That gets in their minds that women are bad, they’re red, they’re stay away, they’re don’t go near.” She continued by offering her perspective on the impact this message might have on recruits, “They don’t even know why. They just know somebody who they admire, their drill instructor, somebody who they aspire to be like, those individuals are telling them ‘stay away, don’t go near, bad-bad-bad.’”<sup>30</sup>

Many male Marines reported being told to stay away from females at some point in their career. Some women also reported being told not to associate with men but noted that this was difficult to do considering the demographics of the Corps. Combined with the low number of women in the fleet, the message that the opposite sex should be avoided seems to have more resonance with men and, thus, a more negative impact on women.

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<sup>29</sup> Female participants gave firsthand accounts of being targets of male wrongdoing, and both male and female participants gave secondhand accounts of wrongdoings that they witnessed or heard about. Wrongdoings include (but are not limited to) verbal harassment, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. Outside of social media misconduct, wrongdoings are not discussed in this “quick-look” report.

<sup>30</sup> Participant #306, 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

*Early negative perceptions upon entering the fleet*

**While women can attempt to manage how others perceive them, they discussed how they cannot control the preconceived notions of others.** This was an issue when women entered a new unit. For example, one Marine, who is married to a male Marine, recounted her experience checking into her first unit after the Basic School (TBS).

Straight out of TBS, came here ... just so excited to be part of the Marine Corps, sat down, introduced myself to my commanding officer. One of the first things he says to me is, “Well, you’re one of three females here. We had an incident with the last female that was here. So, I’m not going to have this issue where you come in here – where I’m going to need to sit down with you in the future about you sleeping with anybody, am I?” And I just kind of sat there [*laughs*] like, “What do I say to this? Like would you ask a man that?” ... Had I been a different person and maybe had I been a little bit more seasoned as a lieutenant – I was a boot – ... I told [my CO], “No, I guarantee you that is something you and I will never have to discuss,” but then I told my husband when I was at home and he’s like, “Holy shit.” He’s like, “That’s something we [male Marines] would never have to deal with,” and I kind of – in that moment I was like, “Damn it.” I pride myself in [being] somebody who is very outspoken, and I sat there, and I took it.<sup>31</sup>

Male Marines are not alone in prejudging women who arrive in a unit. Women also say that they are judgmental of one another, in part because individual women are perceived as representative of all. In a mixed gender focus group in Okinawa, a female corporal explained,

I would say like with females there’s a lot of negative stigma. For me the way I see females is whenever we get a new female, all the other females are holding their breath like “Is she going to be a good Marine? Is she going to be lazy? Is she going to be good at PT? Is she going to make us look bad?” ... so there’s like a lot of negative stigma, so when you get a new female, more often than not you’re worried that they’re just going to make other females look bad.<sup>32</sup>

**This has the potential to contribute to a lack of cohesion among women, who sometimes spoke about being competitive with one another and not wanting to associate with other women for fear of “absorbing” their reputations.**

*Danger in office conversations: Who can be seen with whom?*

The perception that women are dangerous manifests in everyday actions. For example, during a focus group with four male staff NCOs<sup>33</sup>, participants talked about how the common practice of not being alone behind closed doors with female Marines has damaging repercussions. To address this possibility, a master sergeant explained that he has someone else in the room regardless of whether he is speaking to a man or woman.

*MSgt H:* ... So I would do – I would do it on both sides of the table because if you don’t, you’re actually – you’re actually breeding that-

<sup>31</sup> Participant #045, 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Participant #264 (Cpl A), Corporal, Sgt and Below Focus Group, Okinawa, 18 October 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Participants #236 (MSgt H) – Master Sergeant and #522 (SSgt J) – Staff Sergeant, SNCO Focus Group, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

*SSgt J:* You're promoting the stigma.

*MSgt H:* You're promo- you're breeding it, and you promote it. Not intentionally, but I guarantee you that the little lance corporal on the ground said, "Man, any time he brings a female in his office, he brings somebody in there with him." And I guarantee you the female was saying, "he never brings anybody into the office. Why did he talk with lance corporal [*name removed per human subjects protection protocol*] by himself, but every time he talks to me he brings somebody in the office?" ... If you continue that, I guarantee you it's being watched, and it's being learned.

*SSgt J:* Yeah, that's a bigger point, is it becomes learned behavior from other people that are like, "oh, we have to treat someone differently than we would another junior Marine in the same exact situation." And you don't.

As the master sergeant points out, Marines are watching one another and sometimes coming to negative conclusions based merely on appearances. A female sergeant <sup>34</sup> talked about how she would often talk to her OIC alone in his office because she felt that he was the most competent on the work-related issues she brought before him. Others, including her staff NCO, perceived this relationship to be non-professional, and her staff NCO retaliated by giving her low pros and cons.

*MODERATOR:* But your OIC obviously did notice your quality as a Marine. But this was also a problem because your enlisted supervisor decided that that meant you guys had some kind of other relationship beyond what was normal.

*Sgt A:* Mm-hmm.

*MODERATOR:* Do you have any idea what gave him that idea?

*Sgt A:* Just because we talked a lot, but it was all work related. I'd go to his office a lot, but that – his office was right outside our office. But I had to because nobody else knew how to do the work I was doing, and if I had a question I couldn't just ask one of my NCOs. They'd be, "I don't know. Go ask your OIC."

*MODERATOR:* Hmm. Yeah. I mean I've heard this before. I mean just even having a conversation gets-

*Sgt A:* Taken out of context.

This type of situation, where women's behavior is prejudged to be inappropriate solely because they are women, seems to be common for female Marines.

### ***Fear of appearing weak***

Women discussed how they perceive an almost constant need to monitor and adjust their behavior, even to their detriment at times, so as not to be perceived in a negative light. For

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<sup>34</sup> Participant #041 (Sgt A), Sergeant, Sgt and Below Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

instance, during a focus group with three junior enlisted women, a corporal stated that she did not want to give the men she works with any reason to see her as different from them.

Like if [I] need help if- like if something is too heavy, I would- I'd just do it. I'd just do it, and I'd pray that box don't fall on me or something like that. Because I don't want to ask, and I don't want to make it seem like they're like, "well, you guys are weak." Like, you know? I don't want us to look like that because that's not true.<sup>35</sup>

**In this research, many participants discussed elemental aspects of what makes women and men different, including physical strength. In the same vein, women's emotional strength is often perceived to be lower. This can create an environment in which women minimize and normalize misbehavior both within their own thinking and in their deliberations about reporting.** One woman explained why she does not report when men make inappropriate comments to her in the following way, "as a female, I feel most of us don't want to complain about it because it just seems like we're weaker and that we can't handle it on our own."<sup>36</sup> As we have seen with the Marines United example, women may be scrutinized for their behavior when they do report incidents, and, therefore, those situations may go unreported.<sup>37</sup>

### *Perceptions of low performance*<sup>38</sup>

Relatedly, **participants talked about how the actions and attributes of women are scrutinized – by both men and women – on a level that men's actions are not.** Commenting on this, a male master gunnery sergeant said,

If you have a male Marine who's like below average or average at physical training and there's a female Marine that's the same level, they'll say, "Oh yeah look at that female Marine. She's like weak and can't do this or can't do that," but they wouldn't say anything about the male Marine for the exact same circumstances.<sup>39</sup>

A female 1<sup>st</sup> sergeant also spoke to this double standard and how much harder she perceives she has to work just to be seen as equal to the lowest performing male.

I've always had to prove myself on how I can perform as a Marine. It gets old though. Because I can be doing better than your- most- awful Marine that you have, male Marine. And I'll still have to, I'll still have to work harder. And I will still have to work harder to get the perception away from peers and seniors that [*long pause*] women can't do the job.<sup>40</sup>

In some cases, expectations that women will be low performers may even determine whether instructors will offer remedial training or SNCOs will take the time to mentor junior Marines. This is a topic that the researchers anticipate will be covered after further analysis.

<sup>35</sup> Participant #233 (Cpl K), Corporal, Sgt and Below Focus Group, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Participant #041 (Sgt A), Sergeant, Sgt and Below Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Although there is not space for it in this report, another researcher insight is the complexity surrounding a Marine's decision to report or not report a wrongdoing. The decision is complex not only for those victimized by wrongdoing but also for those who witness it.

<sup>38</sup> Many participants commented on the differences in physical standards for male and female Marines as well as broader issues about how the Marine Corps measures performance. These issues will be addressed in later reports.

<sup>39</sup> Participant #231, Master Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Participant #220, 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

***The inescapability of sexual stereotypes: Perception is reality***

A 1<sup>st</sup> sergeant expressed her frustration about stereotypes and labels, specifically the entrenched message that female Marines have the option of being one of three things: a slut, bitch, or dyke. Enlisted women have received this message from their drill instructors, and its prevalence in the Marine Corps has been addressed in prior research.<sup>41</sup>

And that's the bad thing. ... We get labels. And it's not labels that we create. It's labels that the men give us. Either you're gonna be a slut or you're gonna be a bitch and you're making us choose. Why can't I just be a professional? Why can't I just be a professional just like you? You're a Marine. You give me the ultimatum. Why? That, that irritates me. That's everywhere.<sup>42</sup>

Women often expressed a sense of lack of agency and bewilderment regarding the labels that are given to them. A lance corporal, for example, realized quickly how “perception is reality” can mean that she has very little agency in how she is viewed. If she is hanging around with male Marines, which is a very common occurrence for female Marines due to demographics, she is labeled a slut.

There's rumors going around constantly. ... So like a lot of them thought I was a slut even though I don't sleep around or I don't do anything crazy like that. I don't know. It's just, it's hard to get through that 'cause you're just like “that's not who I am at all!” I go to church every Sunday. I'm well-behaved. I do exactly what I'm supposed to. But like everybody will have like this completely different concept of you because perception is reality in the Marine Corps. Really, and as a female if you hang out with men all the time, if you wear a short dress, or if you get something that's a little bit too low cut, or if you wear high heels, which I do all the time, that's because you want it, 'cause you're looking to get some, not because they happen to make my legs look good and I like it.<sup>43</sup>

A 1<sup>st</sup> sergeant talked about how women who “reject” the advances of male Marines become the topic of rumors in the barracks and the unit. These rumors, however, are unequally applied because where women may be called a slut despite saying “no,” a man who pursues sex with one or many women is praised.

But it's when you say “no” and they're still adamant about carrying on, like “what don't you understand about no?” Right? And then the woman has to go, she has to be a bitch or she has to be something in order for you to get it, and then you call her these negative things. ... They couldn't take the rejection well or would just take one wrong guy, one minor rejection, all of a sudden you're this and you're that. ... Once I became a staff NCO, we're older than the rest of the Marines. And so we see it from different eyes. If I started getting wind of “so-and-so and she did this or she did that,” I would, a lot of times, I would pull her in and ask her if she's okay, what's going on, and then she would get upset because so-and-so asked her out and she told him she didn't want to go out with him or whatever it was. But it's funny because now there's a rumor about her. And I

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<sup>41</sup> E.g., Archer, E. M. (2013). “The power of gendered stereotypes in the US Marine Corps.” *Armed Forces & Society*, 39(2), 359-391.

<sup>42</sup> Participant #220, 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Participant #270 (LCpl C), Lance Corporal, Sgt and Below Focus Group, Okinawa, 18 October 2017.

always told them, my mentality is “Guys or girls, if you want to sleep around with as many people as you want, go ahead. If you're not married, if you're practicing safe sex, knock yourself out.” But the women can't dare even dabble because it's all these names and all these reputations, these things are going around about her. The guys, of course, it's the thumbs up, it's the, all of that.<sup>44</sup>

**For women, the frustration lies not only in the fact that they are unfairly labeled but also in that this label diminishes achievements,** as was the case with the MCB Camp Lejeune sergeant who received low pros and cons for speaking to her OIC in order to do her job better. As discussed below, negative views of women may also undermine a woman's ability to lead.

### *On not being listened to or respected*

**Female Marine leaders saw their leadership capabilities constantly questioned because of their sex.** A major, for example, said,

I've been fortunate to have worked for males and females, and the things that males can do and say and not bat an eye, you know, if the female were to say the same thing, it would just be totally taken out of context, and it would just, they perceive it differently. So, you can be a female and you can be strong, and you're smart and everything. But make a decision, and all of a sudden, you know, everyone thinks it's a horrible decision. “They don't know what they're talking about. They don't know.” Like so, whereas [laughs] a male leader makes the same decision and it's like, “Well, he's the CO, he must know what he's doing.”<sup>45</sup>

She continued that, unlike her male colleagues, she is told, “Well, prove to me that your decision is a right one. ... Prove to me that you know what you're doing.’ Whereas for the ... you didn't have that same expectation, that same level of scrutiny, I don't think, as a male.”<sup>46</sup>

**A male master gunnery sergeant stated that while he sees the gender gap in the Marine Corps improving, he still believes that women are not treated as equals and that the bias against women is even more nuanced when you take into account appearance.** He says that this is more prevalent on the officer side.

I've seen that all the time where they don't get the time of day at all. I've seen it like hundreds of times in my career, where especially it's worse for the female officers you know. Unless you're like really hot? ... Like if the ones that are really attractive, then people like, “Oh she's really attractive,” and they'll get favoritism ‘cause they really attractive. But if they're just like average looking or maybe they're like a minority, they don't get the time of day.<sup>47</sup>

Women also talked about how their male counterparts disrespected their achievements, attributing them to favoritism and their sex.

I got meritoriously promoted when I was a corporal, and everybody was saying, “Oh, it's ‘cause she's a female” ‘Cause meritoriously promoted means you go on a board. You

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<sup>44</sup> Participant #306, 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Participant #303, Major, Interview, MCB Quantico, 7 September 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Participant #303.

<sup>47</sup> Participant #231.



compete against a whole bunch of people, and if you win, you get promoted before you would normally get promoted. But yeah, a lot of people were really mean to me about it for winning. ... I worked my butt off, and I sacrificed weekends to study and get my uniforms ready and everything else, and looking at my stats, they were a lot better than everyone else's, but I still – everyone gave me a hard time.<sup>48</sup>

There is not enough space here to address all of the everyday challenges that women face in the Marine Corps. Other issues that came up – including, for example, women's complications with equipment designed for male bodies and hostility towards pregnant Marines – will likely be explored in subsequent reports.

### **Conclusion: Diving into the Complexity to Find Better Solutions**

Though these are initial insights from the researchers prior to having conducted systematic data analysis, they provide some insights about the lived experience of women in the Marine Corps and how the misconduct seen on Marines United may or may not be indicative of a problem with Marine Corps culture. Researchers heard many different takes on the Marines United misconduct and the influences that lead to this type of behavior. **The inherent challenge when attempting to describe this type of issue is that it is not a single issue.** Rather, the situation entails a conflux of longstanding issues (the objectification of women, the dominance of men in the Corps, etc.) and new factors (social media, technology, and evolving gender roles and expectations) whose presence exert influence over the cultural fabric of not only the Marine Corps but also society as a whole. In short, it is difficult to have just one conversation about “the problem” because its roots and reach are far too complex. However, in listening to the voices of Marines, we can begin to unravel the myriad ways that the problem is *lived* and perpetuated. Female voices are especially instructive in this regard, as an examination of their everyday experiences provides insights into the toxic soil that allows bad behavior – like the type seen on Marines United and so much more – to grow.

Although there is no space to discuss them all in this short report, several of the factors that breed negative experiences for female Marines are part and parcel of larger issues that impact all Marines and the Corps as a whole. For instance, both men and women talked about problems related to issues of leadership, wrongdoing and reporting (or not reporting), negotiating the boundaries of humor, barracks life, misconceptions about the value of diversity, the challenges of being a Marine and a parent, and conflicts in Marine Corps messaging and values, just to name a few. As intricate and interconnected as all of these problems are, diving in to examine such complexity will help the Marine Corps frame the problem more accurately and comprehensively, leading the way to more effective solutions.

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<sup>48</sup> Participant #061, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.