

Women Claiming Space in the Military: The Experiences of Female South African Soldiers

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KEYWORDS Feminism. Gender Mainstreaming. Sexual Harassment

ABSTRACT As the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) continues to expand its role in promoting peace and stability in Africa, the Minister of Defence has called for the full and equal participation of women in all aspects of the SANDF, including military operations. Many South African women embrace this call, though not without difficulty. This paper aims to describe key aspects of women's experiences of their participation in military operations. The written texts of 89 SANDF women with recent operational experience were qualitatively analysed. The findings reveal women's efforts to claim space through joining the military, participating in military operations and seizing leadership positions. The paper also addresses various ways that the military challenges this claiming of space, through undermining woman leaders, sexual harassment and inadequate gender mainstreaming. The data is used to highlight ambivalence in the military, as an institution of hegemonic masculinity, towards the integration of women.