

Reports find pervasive and increasing sexual abuse in the US military

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Female service members in the US military stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait have reported more than 100 cases of sexual assault or misconduct by male soldiers. Complaints have been filed against members of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps.

Prompted by these allegations, the Army assembled a task force in February and released a report in May concluding that incidents of sexual abuse in the service have climbed steadily over the past five years. Data released separately by the Army Criminal Investigative Division also revealed that the number of sexual assault cases reported to the division increased yearly from 1999 to 2003.

The data, obtained by the *Washington Post* under a Freedom of Information Act request, represents the first military-wide annual tallies made public since 1998. The figures show that the total number of reported cases of sexual assault involving Army personnel increased by 19 percent from 1999 to 2002—from 658 to 783—with annual increases ranging from 2 percent to 13 percent. During the same period, the number of reported rapes increased by 25 percent—from 356 to 445.

“The Army acknowledges that these tallies probably understate the magnitude of the problem. Advocacy groups say that sexual assaults are routinely underreported, and that the military victims are further inhibited by rules that bar confidentiality. A Defense Department report on the problem in May, based on visits to 21 military locations, provided data indicating rising sexual assaults from 2002 to 2003, which a Defense official said probably represented a fraction of the total in those years,” according to the *Post*.

The Defense Department’s study acknowledged that victims are inadequately supported legally and psychologically and that investigations into the crimes are routinely hampered. The Pentagon’s investigation was provoked, in part, by the complaints of female cadets at the Air Force Academy in Colorado that assault allegations were often ignored. A different report on the academy by the Defense Department’s inspector general claimed that one-fifth of the women had reported experiencing at least an attempted sexual assault.

Another inquiry conducted in 2003 by the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Iowa City, Iowa, stated that 28 percent of the 558 female veterans surveyed had been raped or experienced an attempted rape during their military service. The study opined that an atmosphere in which commanders condoned a variety of

abusive sexual behavior increased the likelihood of rape against servicewomen.

“Sexual assault and domestic violence are widespread in the armed services,” argued an article posted on the Amnesty International web site, entitled “Camouflaging Criminals: Sexual Violence Against Women in the Military.” The article was adapted from the three-part *Denver Post* series—“Betrayals in the Ranks”—based on a nine-month investigation by reporters Amy Herdy and Miles Moffeit. The series was originally published by the Colorado newspaper in November 2003.

“Last year’s sexual assault scandal at the Air Force Academy followed two decades of warning signs,” state the reporters. (The academy scandal erupted when it was revealed that over the past decade, 142 cadets made sexual assaults charges that had resulted in zero convictions.)

Herdy and Moffeit go on to cite the example of the 1991 Navy Tailhook Association convention in Las Vegas, where more than 100 officers sexually assaulted and harassed dozens of women, then sabotaged the Navy’s investigation into the episode. There were no convictions. Also mentioned is the shelving of findings linking sexual harassment to military culture after a 1996 sexual assault scandal at the Aberdeen Proving Ground, where Army drill instructors were accused of raping trainees. “Two years later, a National Academy of Public Administration panel said that problems were widespread in military criminal investigations into sex crimes,” write Herdy and Moffeit.

Over 200,000 women currently serve in the armed forces, with Pentagon officials putting the percentage of women raped in the single digits. Yet two Department of Veteran Affairs surveys conducted in the past 10 years found that 21 percent and 30 percent of women reported a rape or attempted rape. The civilian equivalent is 18 percent, according to a federal survey in 2000. During congressional hearings in 1991, it was estimated that approximately 200,000 women had been sexually assaulted by servicemen, although it is unclear during which time period.

On the occasions that punishment has been meted out, it is generally mild. Over the past decade, twice as many accused Army sex offenders—with charges ranging from rape to indecent acts upon a minor—were given administrative punishment (non-judicial) as were court-martialed.

Even serial offenders are allowed to resign with administrative reprimands and therefore generally slip back into the civilian world with no criminal record.

In the course of its investigation, the *Post* interviewed 60 women, who never reported the attacks for fear of retaliation or that they would not be believed. (A 1988 Pentagon survey found that more than 90 percent of military sexual-harassment victims did not report their incidents.)

The authors expound: “These problems take a human toll. Dozens of veterans told the *Post* that being assaulted ruined their careers and sent them down a destructive path, including addictions and suicide attempts. Many carry the scar for life. ‘When I looked at the American flag, I used to see red, white and blue,’ said Marian Hood, a veteran who was gang-raped. ‘Now, all I see is blood ... The red represents the blood I’ve shed. The blue represents my bruises—the way my faced looked. I was beaten and raped for my country. That should be enough.’”

Sharon Mixon, now 33, was also gang-raped by her fellow soldiers in 1991. “If I was captured, I would have been mentally prepared. If you got shot, everyone would be there to sew you up, to take care of you ... I was awarded for valor when I was in Desert Storm, so it wasn’t like I was a coward. I was a good soldier,” related an anguished Mixon.

“These women, over and over again, go through psychological evaluations, punishments, and character assassinations,” Christine Hansen, director of the Miles Foundation, a nonprofit victim advocacy group, told the *Post*. “Everything from, ‘You sleep around’ to ‘You’ve got mental problems’ to ‘You’re a lesbian.’ And in the majority of our cases, there has been no justice for the victim.”

Adding a revealing insult to injury is the fact that sexual trauma does not qualify as a disability eligible for compensation. It is an eligible disability only when it is included under the generic category of post-traumatic stress disorder, which the VA defines as “psychological symptoms that may occur after a person experiences a traumatic event.”

Sexual trauma may be harder to cope with than the effects of combat, according to a 1998 VA study. “Yet because many sexual-trauma victims don’t report their assaults, they struggle to live with the debilitating effects of PTSD on their own, according to experts. Many use drugs or alcohol in an attempt to numb their pain. They isolate, unable to trust anyone. They have trouble sleeping and eating, and may develop physical ailments including stomach, heart and gynecological disorders,” conclude Herdy and Moffeit.

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The *Post* journalists also deal with victims of another type of abuse in the military—domestic violence: “Soldiers who beat their wives or girlfriends usually avoid jail.” Between 1997 and 2001, more than 10,000 cases of spousal abuse a year have been substantiated. Of those cases, 114 were homicides committed against adults, according to military records.

“The military defines domestic violence as acts of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. For statistical purposes, however, the military often does not count intimate partners such as girlfriends as domestic-abuse victims, contrary to the civilian world.

“The rate of reported spouse abuse in the military declined from 1997 to 2001—from 22 per thousand active-duty personnel to 16.5

per thousand. But memos show that Pentagon officials believed in 2001 that the decline was caused in part by fears that reporting the crimes could hurt careers, and that commanders were not reporting all incidents,” assert the authors.

One of the most recent horrific episodes of military domestic violence occurred during the summer of 2002, when in the space of six weeks, the wives of four Fort Bragg, North Carolina, soldiers were murdered. Three of the four offending soldiers had recently returned from Afghanistan, where they served with Special Forces units. In July, a fifth domestic-related killing at Fort Bragg involved the wife of a Special Forces major who allegedly shot her husband in the head and chest while he slept.

A serviceman with a record of spouse abuse can be honorably discharged. Of the abusers who left the military between 1988 and 1993, some 75 to 84 percent received honorable discharges, and 54 percent had been promoted, according to a Defense Department study.

“The Air Force became my husband’s No.1 enabler. As long as his superiors did not think his abuse was a problem, neither did he,” said Nicole Beassie, whose husband was given an honorable discharge.

Sexual violence within the military is at the very least sanctioned by the top brass. In 2001, the Cox Commission found that “the far-reaching role of commanding officers in the court-martialing process remains the greatest barrier to operating a fair system of criminal justice.”

Dorothy Mackey, a retired Air Force captain who now heads a rape-victim advocacy group, summed up the issue in this way: “The military, in my opinion, is normalizing rape.”

As a volunteer force—one of whose main sources of recruitment is the most oppressed layer of the population—the US military is called upon to be the “iron fist” behind America’s bid for global hegemony. The military deliberately seeks to deaden humane and compassionate impulses in its troops and encourages brutality and sadism, preparing soldiers for ruthless and unpopular interventions. No one should be shocked when members of the US armed forces follow the logic of their training and apply the dictum “force works” to sexual relations and family life.



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