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Rape Victims Ask, Military Won't Tell on Assaults: Ann Woolner

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When a woman volunteers for the U.S. [military](#), she gives up the comfort, safety and freedom of civilian life. This she expects, as do men.

Serving her country shouldn't mean doubling her likelihood of being sexually assaulted, or, if she is, lowering the chance that the offender will be punished. But that's what the military means for women, according to the [Service Women's Action Network](#).

What the Pentagon gives out in the way of this sort of information shows only a slice of reality, says Anuradha Bhagwati, a former Marine and the executive director of the servicewomen's group, which is based in New York.

Her group has gone to [court](#) with its claim that the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs are stonewalling its request for more data.

A Defense Department press officer, Major Monica Bland, wouldn't address the litigation specifically but acknowledged the problem.

"Much work remains to be done," Bland said by e-mail, and "the Department is committed to the goals of preventing sexual assault, increasing reporting, and improving DoD response to the crime."

The servicewomen's group puts it this way in its lawsuit: "Sexual assault pervades the ranks of the American military." The American Civil Liberties [Union](#) and its Connecticut chapter are also plaintiffs in the case, filed in federal court in Connecticut.

Records Wanted

They want records, on mistreatment ranging from sexual harassment to rape, that will better reveal the frequency and circumstances, the prosecution of cases and the treatment given victims, who

often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

The various branches of the armed forces define, count, track and report incidents differently. Because of that, the annual reports Congress requires of the Defense Department can't tell the full picture. Letters from the servicewomen's organization to agencies within Defense and the VA produced few records, so the group filed suit this week.

The idea that members and veterans of the U.S. military would have to go to court to get this information is astounding. Where is [Julian Assange](#) when he's really needed?

Even incomplete, the numbers that are available are disturbing enough.

Surveys in recent years show that roughly one in three servicewomen say they were sexually assaulted during their time in the military. Of those who say they were raped, 14 percent said they were gang-raped, according to a survey reported by the American Journal of Industrial Medicine in 2003.

Fear of Reprisal

As hesitant as sexual-assault victims in civilian life are to report the crime, it's worse in the military. Fear of reprisal, uncertainty over what will result, and the military structure and mindset all discourage victims from reporting.

Still, either reporting is getting better or sexual predation is getting worse in the services. A Defense Department [report](#) released this week shows sexual assaults at the military service academies are up.

And, citing Defense Department figures, the lawsuit says the number of sexual assaults within the armed services rose 73 percent from 2004 to 2006 and 11 percent from 2008 to 2009.

While the government has made it easier for servicemen and servicewomen to get help for post-traumatic stress disorder, the improvements won't do much to help victims of sexual mistreatment, according to Bhagwati. The veteran with combat-related PTSD no longer has to prove a precise link between his condition and a specific episode. But victims of sexual assault have to show they were assaulted, hard to do in a system where records are often not kept.

Widespread Trauma

And yet, 71 percent of female veterans seeking VA disability benefits for PTSD have been sexually

traumatized, says the lawsuit.

Already we know enough to recognize a very serious problem. And it seems to be getting worse, even after high-profile promises to protect service members against sexual predators, increased reporting and more educational programs, and recommendations to standardize reporting and create environments where victims feel safe to report and offenders fear the consequences.

So it's no surprise that while about 40 percent of those accused of sexual assault in the civilian world get prosecuted, only 8 percent of military sex offenders do.

'Loses a Stripe'

"Maybe somebody loses a stripe or gets some counseling," Bhagwati says. "Some are literally transferred out of unit without any written paperwork."

Consider the case of three enlisted sailors who were discharged from the Navy after the rape of a female midshipman enrolled at Annapolis.

During a cruise with classmates, she and nine other midshipmen left the ship for a party in a sailor's apartment. The other midshipmen eventually left her behind with three enlisted sailors, at least one of whom raped her, according to the new report on sexual violence at military academies.

The sailors' punishment was discharge, not civilian prosecution.

Surely the worldwide sex scandal involving some Catholic priests taught that you can't handle these things internally and let the predator move someplace else to prey on the unaware.

Protecting servicemen and servicewomen from sexual mistreatment, whether harassment, assault or rape, is hard enough when you know precisely what's going on.

But until there's enough information to know that, it simply can't get much better.

And no one signs up for that.

([Ann Woolner](#) is a Bloomberg News columnist. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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