

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: December 15th, 2010
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Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) Reacts to Dept. of Defense Report on Sexual Assault Trends at Military Academies

Demands Pentagon Back-Up Today's Report with Immediate Action to Change "Institutionalized Culture of Sexual Assault and Harassment"

NEW YORK, NY— Earlier today, the Department of Defense's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) issued their "Annual Report on Sexual Harassment and Violence at the U.S. Military Service Academies." Responding to the release of the report, the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) - a national human rights organization founded and led by women veterans – called on the Pentagon to immediately undergo a process of reviewing and updating policy measures to combat a pervasive culture of rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment (defined by the Dept. of Defense as "Military Sexual Trauma", or MST) currently found within the military service academies.

"For the Pentagon to release today's report without a plan to implement significant policy changes to combat these findings, signals a lack of any real dedication by our military leadership to change an environment that is weakening our military," said Anuradha Bhagwati, a former Marine Corps Captain and Executive Director of SWAN. "The military is a top-down organization. Positive cultural change must begin with accountability from the highest levels of military leadership. The vast majority of generals and admirals began their careers as cadets and midshipmen at the military academies. They have been steeped in leadership models and ethical traditions that clearly fail when it comes to issues of Military Sexual Trauma."

The report released today has been published annually since 2006 and provides data on reported sexual assaults involving cadets and midshipmen, as well as policies, procedures and processes implemented in response to sexual harassment and violence during the previous academic year. The full report is available at: <http://www.sapr.mil/index.php/annual-reports>.

"The reality today is that military academies are insular environments where sexual predators face little risk of prosecution, and survivors have little hope for institutional protections," continued Bhagwati. "The academies integrated in 1976 and it took 30 years before a West Point cadet was convicted on a rape charge. Although, cadets are finally being prosecuted for sexual offenses, the punishment rarely fits the crime. To change the current culture of impunity, we must hold military leaders accountable by demanding that they support survivors and relentlessly prosecute sexual predators."

Recently a military court, after hearing testimony of multiple rape allegations, sentenced West Point Cadet Kyle Newman to only 3-1/2 years in prison for raping a fellow cadet. In New York State, first degree rape is a class B felony, punishable by 12-1/2 to 25 years in prison. To read the USMA's press release on the case, go to:

http://www.usma.edu/dcomm/PressReleasesbd/nr3610cadet_sentenced_at_court martial.html.

Yesterday, SWAN and the ACLU filed a lawsuit in U.S. Federal District Court in New Haven, CT against the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration (VA) to obtain the release of records under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) on the prevalence of MST within the armed services, the policies of the DOD and VA regarding MST and other related disabilities, and the nature of each agency's response to MST. To read the press release announcing the filing of yesterday's lawsuit, please go to:

<http://www.aclu.org/womens-rights/swan-and-aclu-file-lawsuit-seeking-military-sexual-trauma-records-withheld-federal-gov>.

A copy of the lawsuit can be found at: <http://www.aclu.org/womens-rights/swan-and-aclu-file-lawsuit-seeking-military-sexual-trauma-records-withheld-federal-gov>.

SWAN is a national human rights organization founded and led by women veterans. SWAN's vision is to transform military culture by securing equal opportunity and the freedom to serve in uniform without threat of harassment, discrimination, intimidation or assault. SWAN also seeks to reform veterans' services on a national scale to guarantee equal access to quality health care, benefits and resources for women veterans and their families. You can follow Service Women's Action Network on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/servicewomen>, or on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/servicewomen>.

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