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## *Rape in the Military: Female Troops Deserve Much Better*

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More than 59,000 female troops have been deployed overseas to support the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They have flown combat missions, served on ships and, in 12 cases, died in Iraq — stark evidence of the equality women have attained as soldiers.

Yet, when several reported sexual assaults in the combat zone during the past year, equal treatment vanished. They say their complaints were ignored or spurred mistreatment by male superiors.

Thirty-seven women who have served in Iraq and Kuwait in recent months have reported to a civilian group that they were sexually assaulted by fellow troops or superiors during their assignments overseas. They or their families contacted the Miles Foundation, a Connecticut-based organization known for championing the cause of abused military women.

While the foundation has declined to release details of the incidents, it said some women felt that they had been doubly victimized: first by attackers in their own ranks and then by shoddy military treatment. They complained that the military failed to provide basic services available to civilians who have been raped, from medical attention to criminal investigations of their charges, according to Kate Summers, Miles' director of victim services.

The accusations, first reported Jan. 25 by The Denver Post, raise disturbing questions about the military's ability to protect women putting their lives on the line for the nation from attacks within their own ranks. And the charges echo more than a decade of military missteps in handling sexual misconduct cases.

At least 60 members of Congress are so outraged by the reports that two bipartisan groups of lawmakers are asking for inquiries by the Pentagon or the House Armed Services Committee, which oversees the military. Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., co-chair of the Congressional Women's Caucus, said the military faces a grave security problem "if we have to protect our troops from our own troops."

Several problems link the complaints of the women who reported assaults to the Miles Foundation. Among them:

- Poor medical treatment.** Eleven women reported assaults to military authorities, but several said they were not tested for sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy. Nor did they receive psychological counseling. Assaults occurred in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines, according to Summers, who wouldn't reveal further details, citing the women's privacy.

An Army soldier who reported being raped last November in a camp in Kuwait that was a staging area for the Iraq war said she felt superiors ignored her assault and injuries, according to a spokesman for Rep. Joseph Pitts, R-Pa. Only after she attempted suicide last December and Pitts intervened with the secretary of the Army was she flown to her U.S. base, the spokesman said.

•**Condoned retribution.** One female officer who reported an assault by a subordinate now faces a court-martial on charges of fraternizing with a subordinate and adultery because she is married. Summers said her alleged assailant has not been charged. Another officer, placed on medication for trauma after belatedly reporting an assault, said she lost her security clearance because of the drugs she was taking. The loss is a serious blow to her career.

The recent allegations fit a pattern of female troops who have been sexually assaulted by servicemen in combat zones. A study released in 1998 found that a third of 160 women who served in the 1991 Persian Gulf War reported “physical sexual harassment,” including 13 who said they’d been assaulted. The study, conducted by researchers from the Department of Veterans Affairs, did not examine whether the charges were reported formally or acted on by the military.

The latest accusations come a year after reports of commanders’ indifference to sexual assaults at the Air Force Academy. While the Pentagon reassigned the commanders, it failed to address the broader issue of sexual assaults in the military or commit to better protect female service members.

The Pentagon declined to comment on individual cases, but said it does not tolerate sexual misconduct. Commanders have a duty to prevent assaults, protect victims and punish attackers, it says. In 1994, the Pentagon started a program to assist victims and encourage their help in prosecutions.

The military’s efforts to crack down on sexual assaults are hampered in part by the reluctance of some victims to report their attacks. And a study of veterans released last year found that is a common response. In fact, a majority of the 37 women told Miles counselors they did not file complaints because they feared damage to their careers or retribution from their attackers, who continued to work in the same vicinities.

In spite of victims’ reluctance to step forward, enough assault accusations have been lodged to prompt closer scrutiny. That is the best way to determine why women who protect their country get so little protection themselves from the Pentagon.

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