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Sexual Assault Pervasive in the Military, Experts Say

By Marie Tessier, WEnews Correspondent

Sexual assault remains a pervasive problem for women in the military, including those currently deployed overseas. Experts say the military's hierarchy is ill-equipped and unprepared to deal fairly with rape complaints.



Faith Hoffman

(WOMENSENEWS) – Victim advocates and military health care leaders say that sexual assault remains a pervasive problem for women serving in all branches of the military, including those deployed overseas.

Their concern about the assaults on female members of the military is especially high now, with the nation at war and the recent removal of four high-ranking officials from their posts at the U.S. Air Force Academy following an investigation of sexual assaults there.

“It’s not just the academies. It’s not just the Air Force. It’s all the services and it’s a pervasive part of the culture,” says Christine Hansen, executive director of The Miles Foundation, Inc., a victim service and advocacy agency for victims of sexual and domestic violence in the military. “Many women tell me that sexual assault is considered a rite of passage in the service, and they’re treated like the black sheep of the family when they ask for accountability.”

Military sexual trauma has been identified by Pentagon health care experts as a major deployment and readiness issue. Rape victims often experience post-traumatic stress symptoms such as anxiety, depression and intrusive thoughts, and are more likely to develop post-traumatic stress in other situations, according to military research. Sexual trauma is the subject of an increasing number of studies about workplace safety in the armed forces, according to Pentagon’s Web site and health care experts.

Officials last week said they were not able to discover how the issue is being handled in the Iraqi war theater and in and around Afghanistan. Similarly, they could not answer the question of how many assaults have been reported to criminal investigators in recent years.

Air Force legal affairs spokeswoman Valerie Burkes did say, “We do not have a problem with sexual offenses in the Air Force.”

A new assessment of risk factors for sexual assault in the military says that 28 percent of female veterans reported sexual assault during their careers, with consistent rates found across eras, according to a report in the American Journal of Industrial Medicine. The study found that “officer leadership” played an important role in the military environment and safety of women and that an environment with unwanted sexual behaviors increased the odds of rape – factors also cited by Pentagon study panels in recent years.

Military sexual trauma even has its own acronym – MST – in the Veterans Affairs offices. Veterans Affairs hospitals have been required for two years to have counseling services available for sexual trauma. Services are provided for women and men.

Military public affairs officials were unable last week to provide any numbers of reported rapes in their ranks, though they say they are researching the question at Women’s eNews’ request. They also could not answer how many women have been assaulted while deployed in the Middle East or Central Asia.

Twenty-four cases of sexual assault were reported during the first Persian Gulf War deployments in 1990 and 1991, according to the Department of Defense.

Though reports to criminal investigation authorities are difficult to find, a common estimate among advocates and health care experts is about one quarter of women in the military say they have been sexually assaulted during their careers.

In 1996, the Defense Department surveyed women in the military about their experiences in the previous 12 months, and found that 9 percent of women in the Marines, 8 percent of women in the Army, 6 percent of women in the Navy and 4 percent of women in the Air Force had experienced a rape or an attempted rape that year. About 200,000 women serve in the military, so these numbers represent more than 10,000 sexual assaults or attempted assaults each year.

More than 67,000 women veterans, or as much as 29 percent of those served at Veterans Affairs clinics in recent years, say they experienced sexual assault in the military, says Sherri Bauch, a deputy field director for the Women Veterans Health Program. And even those numbers fall far short of a complete count, service providers say. The figures do not cover women veterans who do not use the clinics and would not reflect women who left the service before their enlistment was complete.

“Sexual trauma is something that has happened at all times in history,” said Faith Hoffman, the director of the women’s center at the veterans hospital in Buffalo. She treats women for sexual trauma and post-traumatic stress. “It’s not a new problem, but it is something we can treat, whether the trauma happened yesterday or it happened during the Vietnam War or before. People do not have to live with this secret.”

Lack of Confidentiality, Rigid Hierarchy Make Reporting Rapes Difficult

Health care providers and advocates say that many barriers remain to women reporting sexual assault in the military. Hoffman says that women tell her that they will not even answer “yes” to a screening question if it means their record will reflect that they were raped.

The biggest ongoing problem for sexual assault in the military is the lack of confidentiality, advocates say. Any report to a nurse, doctor, counselor or police officer within the military is something that can be or must be reported to a commander. That can lead to trouble for a victim. Even attempts to hold an offender accountable can be detrimental if a victim is vulnerable to a disciplinary infraction such as those for alcohol, drugs, fraternization or adultery. Such a problem arose with one cadet at the Air Force Academy who was disciplined for having sex after she reported an assault.

“It’s difficult for any victim of sexual assault to come forward, even in the best circumstances,” Hansen says. “Women in the military do not feel safe to say this happened to them, especially if it means the information is going to their commander.”

The entire military criminal justice system is worlds apart from the civilian world, too, advocates and health officials say. The most important difference is that decisions about investigation and prosecution are made within the chain of command, not by an adversarial outside agency like a prosecutor’s office. This leaves commanders with an inherent conflict of interest: On the one hand they are responsible for seeking justice for crimes; on the other, they are bound as leaders to protect the soldiers and sailors they value and to maintain good morale in their units. This can be difficult when an allegation involves an otherwise valuable or likeable serviceman.

“These are highly educated military strategists making decisions, not people trained in rape crisis intervention,” Hansen says. “There’s an inherent conflict of interest that may seriously deter them from holding offenders accountable.”

The issue of consent to a sexual encounter is also more complicated in military situations than in civilian life because of the hierarchy of military command, says Gene Fidell, president of the National Institute of Military Justice, a private group. People in the service are intensely trained to follow orders, so it is problematic for a servicewoman to say “no” to a superior, he says.

“It’s a rigid hierarchy,” he explains. “You’re talking about people who are used to doing what they’re told.”

Even as problems remain, leaders of women's programs within the Veterans Affairs system say they are working hard to advocate for more widespread sexual trauma treatment programs.

"We are seeing a lot of new cases coming in from women's experience being triggered by the stories at the Air Force Academy and of the war," says Hoffman of the Buffalo VA center. "With military sexual trauma counseling we have the ability and the resources now to help women heal."

Marie Tessier is a freelance journalist who writes frequently about violence against women.

For more information:

The Miles Foundation – Services and advocacy for victims of sexual and domestic violence in the military: http://members.aol.com/ht_a/milesfdn/myhomepage/

Center for Women Veterans, Department of Veterans Affairs – <http://www.va.gov/womenvet>

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