



Sexual violence in the US military

Helena Merriman reports on a woman whose experience of sexual assault, while serving in the US Air Force in Afghanistan, turned her into a campaigner for the welfare of service women.

Marti Ribeiro was born into a military family.

Her grandfather and father were both in the Air Force - and all her life she had wanted to join the armed forces.

" I put my weapon down and walked away to smoke a cigarette and that was when I was attacked "

Marti Ribeiro

After she finished school she joined the Air Force Reserve and a few years later, in March 2003, she was deployed to Iraq.

While she loved her job as a public affairs specialist, from the time she arrived she was routinely harassed and called Air Force Barbie.

"I had no idea how difficult it would be," she told the BBC World Service.

"My father, who is a retired military colonel, thought the world of me for joining the military.

"I never saw the personality traits in him that I saw in the military - I never saw what I was getting into."

In 2006 she was in Afghanistan.

"You're supposed to carry your weapon at all times in a combat zone," she said.

"But I put my weapon down and walked away to smoke a cigarette and that was when I was attacked."

She was then dragged behind some power generators and raped.

"If I had kept my weapon maybe I would have been able to prevent it," she says.

"But if I had used it I would probably have ended up in jail."

She went to the authorities but they told her that if she filed a claim, she would be charged with dereliction of duty for leaving her weapon unattended in a combat zone - an offence for which you can be court-martialled.

So she kept quiet and the man who attacked her went unpunished.

"It would be my word over his and they are not going to take my word over his," she said.

When she returned from Afghanistan, she did not talk to anyone about what happened. She says she felt it was all her fault.

'Heartbreaking' phone calls

Congressional leaders, who have been holding hearings this month on sexual assault in the armed forces, say that more needs to be done to tackle what recent studies indicate is a widespread problem.

In 2003, in a survey of female veterans conducted by the University of Iowa, funded by the US Department of Defense, 30% of the 500 female veterans interviewed reported an attempted or completed rape.

Equally worryingly, the Department of Defense estimated in its 2009 annual report on sexual assault, that around 90% of rapes in the military are never reported.

Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez, who sits on the Military Personnel Subcommittee, successfully lobbied last year for the development of a Sexual Assault Database to encourage accountability within the Armed Forces.

"There are plenty of phone calls that come into my office of alleged assault of women by our military men," she says.

"They are heartbreaking. Some women don't want to go public with it, some have gone public with it and they've been drilled out of the military.

"I'm told that the statistics are that once you have been raped in the military you are most likely to be raped over and over."

She says that not enough prosecutions are happening and that while the Pentagon is taking it more seriously, big changes still need to be made.

"Why is it that when a woman alleges rape, the outcome shows that the man who supposedly did this was demoted or moved to another unit? I want to know why this is happening!"

Predators

Dr Kaye Whitley, Director of the US Department of Defense's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (Sapro), says it can be very hard for victims to report a sexual assault.

"We do know that being sexually assaulted takes a great human toll on an individual and there are all kinds of barriers to keep people from wanting to come forward," she says.

" More and more commanders are referring these cases to court martial "
Dr Kaye Whitley, Sapro

One of these barriers, she explains, is that after someone has reported an assault in the US military: "Their command knows, everyone in the unit knows, and it affects 'unit-readiness'."

For this reason there is now a new "restrictive reporting option" so that victims who are afraid of reporting an assault can get the medical care and counselling that they need, without their command having to be notified, and without having to participate in an investigation.

For those who do decide to report a sexual assault, Dr Whitley says the crime is taken seriously.

"We are finding that more and more commanders are referring these cases to court martial," she says.

"One of the things that one of our leaders recently said is that we want to get so good at prosecuting these guys that if there's anybody walking around out there that's a predator, they'll think that the military is the last place they want to end up.

"So we are working very hard on that, we think we can do better," she says.

'Cultural change'

The writer Helen Benedict has been looking into sexual violence in the military for a number of years, and has recently written a play on the subject. She has heard from women whose experiences have ranged from disrespect, to constant sexual harassment, to rape.

"There is a culture that if you report someone, you are seen as a weak soldier who failed to defend yourself," she says.

But she says this does not mean that women should not be serving in the army.

"It is the men who are committing a crime who have a problem. The military has to deal with them and not punish women by shutting them out from this career," she says.

Ms Benedict says that economics may help to bring about the cultural change that she says the army needs.

"The recession means more women are joining the military than ever before. So as women become less of a minority and rise in the ranks and get more power, hopefully the culture will begin to shift," she says.

Meanwhile, Marti Ribeiro is now trying to tackle the issue politically.

She is part of the Service Women's Action Network, which lobbies to improve the welfare of US servicewomen and women veterans.

"This is so that if once my daughter is eligible she turns to me and says 'I want to do what you did,' I can support her," she says.

"But if she asked me right now I would say 'No'."

You can listen to the BBC World Service series on Women at War on all this week until Thursday 18 February.

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