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Women Veteran “Victims” as Viewed By the Media

Posted by [Katy](#) on Feb 29, 2012 in [About Face](#), [Sarah Plummer](#) | [1 comment](#)



Guest Blogger Sarah Plummer

Women veterans are represented by the media in a variety of ways, ranging from wanna-be rape victims (as per [Liz Trotta's](#) recent delusional discourse on Fox News) to princess warriors upon pedestals. As the case goes when talking in extremes, neither far-flung depiction is accurate, and the truth fluctuates somewhere in the proverbial “middle;” where rapes do and don’t happen and where female military members are a mix of princesses, well-adjusted women, militant hardliners, or a dynamic combination of several character traits.

There are plenty of other nicknames and generalizations – both good and bad – I could articulate, but I think you guys get the picture. As much as the media likes to put us in a box, as much as they think the “typical military woman” is a definable entity, as much as they prefer to reduce us down to victim or non-victim, butch or beauty, hardliner or daddy’s girl, they can’t, and they should stop trying. Why not describe military women as the dynamic force that they are? Why not liken them to female entrepreneurs who are blazing business trails or following closely the footsteps of those who’ve recently paved new paths? Why not portray them in a balanced light? Why not pay them the respect they’re due, not *just because* they are service members, but because serving is part of who they are *in addition* to the other qualities that make them unique as women.

In light of recent developments in policy on the role of women in combat (news flash – we’re already there), and then subsequent responses like Liz Trotta’s, I felt like I needed to re-share a piece I wrote late last year which addresses what my hopes are for the media and non-media citizens of our country insofar as their illustration of our nation’s female Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines. The letter below is one I wrote to in response to an [article](#) published by Anu Bhagwati, a female Captain USMC Veteran, admirable role model, and Service Women’s Action Network (SWAN) Executive Director. Anu wrote her piece in response to the play “Lonely Soldier Monologues,” which rendered female service members as a cohesive group of extremes.

Recently, I have found several of your wonderful articles while I’ve been researching other topics. This is yet another one that succinctly and adeptly addresses multiple issues about women in the military. I, too, am a USMC Captain Veteran who experienced years of harassment while I was in the Corps. Also, I was raped by a fellow Marine. I don’t see myself as a victim, although by all definitions I was one. It happened in 2003, so with eight years of separation it’s easy for me to say now that I identify what happened to me as wrong, but that I’ve healed, moved on, made my peace with it. I know that wasn’t how I felt for a good couple of years afterwards, but either way, then or now, I never wanted nor want

pity. If anything, I wanted, and want, understanding. The crazy thing is that reporting the rape was almost worse than the actual experience itself, and the administrative aspect of this whole issue is where I think the system still needs the most work. When you said – “the focus on portraying poor or ignorant girls from the hood rescued by recruiters, or naïve daughters of military-loving, flag-waving families, plays into misplaced audience pity—and triggers deep-seated cultural insecurities about women’s presence in the military—instead of serving military women themselves. Few real-life female soldiers actually see themselves as victims, so why should we?” – you hit the nail on the head. Not everyone who joins is an extremist, a victim, or looking for a way out; certainly, some are, but the play you reference seems to be propagating that as the norm. Moreover, just because someone was a victim of abuse before entering the military doesn’t mean that’s WHY they join. I think it is great when women are able to mentor one another when they discover other abuse/assault victims among their female comrades, but sometimes there does seem to be an overemphasis on this connection. Conceptually, I think the victimhood discussion is similar to your comment – “Among the white servicewomen chosen for portrayal are brainwashed daughters of right-wing, America-loving zealots. For example, one character, a Bible-thumping small-town teenager as gung-ho and out of place as Mother Theresa in camouflage, can’t wait to do “God’s work” in the Army. But the reality is that many troops cross faith with service to one’s country without becoming ignorant crusaders or overzealous missionaries.” I felt called to the Marine Corps myself, but not in the sense of needing to embark on a Crusade. I simply felt that God wanted me in the Marine Corps because that was where I was supposed to be at that point in my life both personally and professionally.

I haven’t seen the play about which you wrote the article, but I have read many articles and seen many interviews that portray the same basic idea you express here: “Despite these steps in the right direction, I can’t help but writhe at the script’s tendency to fall into familiar patterns of stereotyping servicewomen. Benedict focuses on troops who have been particularly traumatized by life. But there are just as many real life recruits who sign up for military service because they are bored, or are naturally drawn to the rigors of military discipline. In addition, Benedict’s left-leaning sympathies seem to keep her from an accurately nuanced representation of military culture.” Even having personally experienced both trauma and triumph in the Marine Corps, it is difficult to talk about the bad without people (whether left-leaning or not) honing in on the distress. It’s hard to express having been a victim because it’s almost always a double edged sword – you can talk about it and offer an example of survival to other victims or feel the cathartic benefits of verbalizing what happened to you – but you will almost always end up judged, pitied, or sometimes both.

It is disappointing to see women vets bow to PC demands when asked about how women are treated in the military. I just watched yet another TV interview of a female vet who was asked about the treatment of women in the military; she answered in vanilla verses. “Well, if you work hard, you are treated fairly.” I scoffed. It’s not that hard work isn’t respected, but there is not a linear relationship between work ethic and professional reward. You don’t always see the best women getting the most respect. In fact, I frequently observed the strongest women getting treated the worst because those were the women the men were the most threatened by! A lot of men join the Corps to prove, in some respects, how manly they are; therefore, when they witness a woman completing the exact same physical tasks they are, it’s as if they can’t process it. I’m not saying every single woman in every single service has been harassed, abused, and/or raped, but many have and should not feel ashamed to say so. I know why they don’t though. They don’t want to look like complainers – by men or women. They don’t want to look weak. They don’t want to badmouth the service of which they were proud to be a part. They don’t want to look unappreciative of the

opportunities afforded them while serving. I didn't want to do any of those things either. If a woman feels as though she will lose the respect of her peers for speaking up – whether it be about something “minor” like harassment or something major like rape – then the intentional and unintentional suppression of reporting these incidents will continue.

Furthermore, I believe one reason cases of harassment/assault of women in the military is currently prominent in the news is because the military purposely claims to hold itself to higher standards of conduct than the general public and many people join for that very reason – to be a part of something perceived as better. We are told over and over again, particularly in the Marine Corps, the few the proud....so why shouldn't we be disenchanted and outraged then when that standard is grossly violated? We use the terms “brothers in arms” and “sisters in arms.” Is it not worse when such heinous acts are committed by family? Because that is effectively what happens when one soldier rapes, harassed, or otherwise abuses another. We certainly should not take it lightly.

Above all, my hope is that we – women, men, active duty, vets, and civilians – continue to evolve in a positive direction to where we can strike a balance in our reactions to the abuses women do suffer in the military. Offenses do not happen all the time to everyone, but when they do happen, we should support in solidarity, not divide in dissent.

Let's all start painting a fuller picture – together.

Capt. Sarah Plummer, USMCR is the prior Deputy Director of Geospatial Intelligence for MCIA and is a military Olympic athlete as a Reservist on the Women's Soccer team. Her blog is at MarineChick.com.

1 Visitor Comment

1. [Kelly](#) March 1, 2012

Way to go, Sarah — I full agree. “Why not describe military women as the dynamic force that they are,” indeed.

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