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Military vets tell Senate panel of sexual abuse by superiors

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By Kristina Wong - The Washington Times

Wednesday, March 13, 2013

When former [Army\(/topics/army/\)](#) Sgt. Rebekah Havrilla(/topics/rebekah-havrilla/) sought help from a chaplain after she was raped by a fellow service member in [Afghanistan\(/topics/afghanistan/\)](#) in 2007, the chaplain told her the "rape was God's will" and that God was trying to get her attention so that she would go back to church.

Six months later, when pictures of her taken during the rape surfaced online, she decided to report it. After a "humiliating" series of interviews about the incident, the rapist's chain of command refused to pursue charges and subsequently closed the case.

When former [Navy\(/topics/navy/\)](#) Petty Officer 3rd Class Brian Lewis(/topics/brian-lewis/) was raped by a senior petty officer aboard a submarine tender in 2000, he said he was told by a commander not to report it, and later was diagnosed with a personality disorder and discharged.

And when former [Army\(/topics/army/\)](#) Spec. BriGette McCoy reported sexual harassment in 1991 after being raped in 1988, she was told by her commander that she "misunderstood the offending [service member's] intentions and was asked, 'What did you want?'" No further action was taken, and she was told to leave the [Army\(/topics/army/\)](#) or face charges herself.

These were just a few firsthand accounts shared by victims of military sexual assault at a [Senate Armed Services subcommittee\(/topics/senate-armed-services-subcommittee/\)](#) hearing Wednesday on personnel.

The [Defense Department\(/topics/united-states-department-of-defense/\)](#) estimates 19,000 sexual assaults occur each year, but only 17 percent are ever reported. In 2010, there were an estimated 19,300 sexual assaults — 8,600 victims were female and 10,700 victims were male, according to [Anu Bhagwati\(/topics/anu-bhagwati/\)](#), executive director of Service Woman's Action Network.

One difficulty in stopping the such assaults is an culture of tolerance of military sexual violence, witnesses testified.

"The old boys club ... is very much alive and well within each service branch," said [Ms. Bhagwati \(/topics/anu-bhagwati/\)](#), adding that as a former Marine officer, she was exposed to a culture "rife with sexism, rape jokes, pornography and widespread commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls in the United States and overseas."

But other challenges are retaliation, intimidation or hostile response that can occur once a victim decides to step forward, witnesses said.

In the military, victims have to report sexual assaults up their chain of command. Until last year, the victim's immediate commander would decide whether to take further action — a problematic prospect especially if the accused was in the same unit.

[Ms. Bhagwati\(/topics/anu-bhagwati/\)](#) said as a Marine officer she witnessed reports of rape, sexual assaults and harassment being swept under the rug by a handful of field-grade officers. Perpetrators were promoted or transferred without punishment, while victims were accused of lying or exaggerating in order to "ruin men's reputations," she said.

Sen. Kirsten E. Gillibrand, New York Democrat and subcommittee chairwoman, called the statistics on prosecution rates for sexual assaults in the military "devastating." Of the 2,439 reports filed in 2011 for sexual violence cases in which an investigation is triggered, only 240 proceeded to trial, she said.

Last April, then-Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta ordered all assaults to be reported up the victim's chain of command to a higher rank than previously required — to a colonel in the [Army](#) , Air Force and Marines; a captain in the [Navy](#) and Coast Guard — who holds special court-martial “convening authority,” or the authority to convene a court-martial.

However, even if a case is prosecuted in the military justice system and a service member is convicted, the accused's convening authority still can dismiss the charges without any recourse for the accuser.

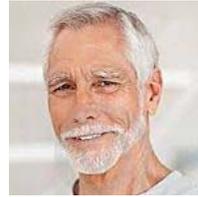
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