

Rape rampant in US military

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Statistics and soldiers' testimonies reveal a harrowing epidemic of sexual assault in the US military.



Earlier this year a house subcommittee held a hearing focused on sexual assault and violence against women in the military and at the academies [Getty]

Sexual assault within the ranks of the military is not a new problem. It is a systemic problem that has necessitated that the military conduct its own annual reporting on the crisis.

A 2003 Air Force Academy sexual assault scandal prompted the department of defense to include a provision in the 2004 National Defense Authorization Act that required investigations and reports of sexual harassment and assaults within US military academies to be filed. The personal toll is, nevertheless, devastating.

Military sexual trauma (MST) survivor Susan Avila-Smith is director of the veteran's advocacy group Women Organizing Women. She has been serving female and scores of male clients in various stages of recovery from MST for 15 years and knows of its devastating effects up close.

"People cannot conceive how badly wounded these people are," she told Al Jazeera, "Of the 3,000 I've worked with, only one is employed. Combat trauma is bad enough, but with MST it's not the enemy, it's our guys who are doing it. You're fighting your friends, your peers, people you've been told have your back. That betrayal, then the betrayal from the command is, they say, worse than the sexual assault itself."

On December 13, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other groups filed a federal lawsuit seeking Pentagon records in order to get the real facts about the incidence of sexual assault in the ranks.

The Pentagon has consistently refused to release records that fully document the problem and how it is handled. Sexual assaults on women in the US military have claimed some degree of visibility, but about male victims there is absolute silence.

Pack Parachute, a non-profit in Seattle, assists veterans who are sexual assault survivors. Its founder Kira Mountjoy-Pepka, was raped as a cadet at the Air Force Academy. In July 2003 she was member of a team of female cadets handpicked by Donald Rumsfeld, at the time the secretary of defense, to tell their stories of having been sexually assaulted. The ensuing

media coverage and a Pentagon investigation forced the academy to make the aforementioned major policy changes.

Report reveals alarming statistics

Mountjoy-Pepka often works with male survivors of MST. She stated in a telephone interview that four per cent of men in the military experience MST. "Most choose not to talk about it until after their discharge from the military, largely because the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in over 60 percent of MST cases is too overwhelming," she informed Al Jazeera.

Last week the Pentagon released its "annual report on sexual harassment and violence at the military service academies". At its three academies, the number of reports of sexual assault and harassment has risen a staggering 64 percent from last year.

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