

## **Culture of misogyny, illegal occupation, fuel sexual violence in military**

By Helen Benedict

August 14, 2008 (AWID) - An alarming number of women soldiers are being sexually abused by their comrades-in-arms, both at war and at home. This fact has received a fair amount of attention lately from researchers and the press — and deservedly so.

But the attention always focuses on the women: where they were when assaulted, their relations with the assailant, the effects on their mental health and careers, whether they are being adequately helped, and so on. That discussion, as valuable as it is, misses a fundamental point. To understand military sexual assault, let alone know how to stop it, we must focus on the perpetrators. We need to ask: Why do soldiers rape?

Rape in civilian life is already unacceptably common. One in six women is raped or sexually assaulted in her lifetime, according to the National Institute of Justice, a number so high it should be considered an epidemic.

In the military, however, the situation is even worse. Rape is almost twice as frequent as it is among civilians, especially in wartime. Soldiers are taught to regard one another as family, so military rape resembles incest. And most of the soldiers who rape are older and of higher rank than their victims, so are taking advantage of their authority to attack the very people they are supposed to protect.

Department of Defense reports show that nearly 90 percent of rape victims in the Army are junior-ranking women, whose average age is 21, while most of the assailants are non-commissioned officers or junior men, whose average age is 28.

This sexual violence persists in spite of strict laws against rape in the military and a concerted Pentagon effort in 2005 to reform procedures for reporting the crime. Unfortunately, neither the press nor the many teams of psychologists and sociologists who study veterans ever seem to ask why.

The answer appears to lie in a confluence of military culture, the psychology of the assailants and the nature of war.

Two seminal studies have examined military culture and its attitudes toward women: one by Duke University Law Professor Madeline Morris in 1996, which was presented in the paper “By Force of Arms: Rape, War, and Military Culture” and published in *Duke Law Journal*; and the other by University of California professor and folklorist Carol Burke in 2004 and explained in her book, *Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane and the High-And-Tight: Gender, Folklore and Changing Military Culture* (Beacon Press). Both authors found that military culture is more misogynistic than even many critics of the military would suspect. Sometimes this misogyny stems from competition and sometimes from resentment, but it lies at the root of why soldiers rape.

One recent Iraq War veteran reflected this misogyny when he described his Marine Corp training for a collection of soldiers' works called Warrior Writers, published by Iraq Veterans Against the War in 2008:

The [Drill Instructor's] nightly homiletic speeches, full of an unabashed hatred of women, were part of the second phase of boot camp: the process of rebuilding recruits into Marines.

Morris and Burke both show that military language reveals this "unabashed hatred of women" all the time. Even with a force that is now 14 percent female, and with rules that prohibit drill instructors from using racial epithets and curses, those same instructors still routinely denigrate recruits by calling them "pussy," "girl," "bitch," "lady" and "dyke." The everyday speech of soldiers is still riddled with sexist insults.

Soldiers still openly peruse pornography that humiliates women. (Pornography is officially banned in the military, but is easily available to soldiers through the mail and from civilian sources, and there is a significant correlation between pornography circulation and rape rates, according to Duke's Morris. And military men still sing the misogynist rhymes that have been around for decades. For example, Burke's book cites this Naval Academy chant:

Who can take a chainsaw  
Cut the bitch in two  
Fuck the bottom half  
And give the upper half to you...

The message in all these insults is that women have no business trying to be soldiers. In 2007, Sgt. Sarah Scully of the Army's 8th Military Police Brigade wrote to me in an e-mail from Kuwait, where she was serving: "In the Army, any sign that you are a woman means you are automatically ridiculed and treated as inferior."

Army Spc. Mickiela Montoya, who was in Iraq for 11 months from 2005-2006, put it another way: "There are only three things the guys let you be if you're a girl in the military: a bitch, a ho or a dyke. One guy told me he thinks the military sends women over to give the guys eye candy to keep them sane. He told me in Vietnam they had prostitutes, but they don't have those in Iraq, so they have women soldiers instead."

The view of women as sexual prey has always been present in military culture. Indeed, civilian women have been seen as sexual booty for conquering soldiers since the beginning of human history. So, it should come as no surprise that the sexual persecution of female soldiers has been going on in the armed forces for decades.

- A 2004 study of veterans from Vietnam and all wars since, conducted by psychotherapist Maureen Murdoch and published in the journal Military Medicine, found that 71 percent of the women said they were sexually assaulted or raped while serving.

- In 2003, a survey of female veterans from Vietnam through the first Gulf War by psychologist Anne Sadler and her colleagues, published in the American Journal of Industrial Medicine, found that 30 percent said they were raped in the military.
- And a 1995 study of female veterans of the Gulf and earlier wars, also conducted by Murdoch and published in Archives of Family Medicine, reported that 90 percent had been sexually harassed, which means anything from being pressured for sex to being relentlessly teased and stared at.
- A 2007 survey by the Department of Veterans Affairs found that homelessness among female veterans is rapidly increasing as women soldiers come back from Iraq and Afghanistan. Forty percent of these homeless female veterans say they were sexually abused while in the service.

Defense Department numbers are much lower. In Fiscal Year 2007, the Pentagon reported 2,085 sexual assaults among military women, which given that there are about 200,000 active-duty women in the armed forces, is a mere fraction of what the veterans studies indicate. The discrepancy can be explained by the fact that the Pentagon counts only those rapes that soldiers have officially reported.

Having the courage to report a rape is hard enough for civilians, where unsympathetic police, victim-blaming myths, and the fear of reprisal prevent some 60 percent of rapes from being brought to light, according to a 2005 Department of Justice study.

But within the military, reporting is much riskier. Platoons are enclosed, hierarchical societies, riddled with gossip, so any woman who reports a sexual assault has little chance of remaining anonymous. She will probably have to face her assailant day after day and put up with resentment and blame from other soldiers who see her as a snitch. She risks being persecuted by her assailant if he is her superior, and punished by any commanders who consider her a troublemaker. And because military culture demands that all soldiers keep their pain and distress to themselves, reporting an assault will make her look weak and cowardly.

For all these reasons, some 80 percent of military rapes are never reported, as the Pentagon itself acknowledges.

This widespread misogyny in the military actively encourages a rape culture. It sends the message to men that, no matter how they feel about women, they won't fit in as soldiers unless they prove themselves a "brother" by demeaning and persecuting women at every opportunity. So even though most soldiers are not rapists, and most men do not hate women, in the military even the nicest guys succumb to the pressure to act as if they do.

Of the 40 or so female veterans I have interviewed over the past two years, all but two said they were constantly sexually harassed by their comrades while they were serving in Iraq or Afghanistan, and many told me that the men were worse in groups than they were individually. Air Force Sgt. Marti Ribeiro, for example, told me that she was relentlessly

harassed for all eight years of her service, both in training and during her deployments in 2003 and 2006:

I ended up waging my own war against an enemy dressed in the same uniform as mine. I had a senior non-commissioned officer harass me on a regular basis. He would constantly quiz me about my sex life, show up at the barracks at odd hours of the night and ask personal questions that no supervisor has a right to ask. I had a colonel sexually harass me in ways I'm too embarrassed to explain. Once my sergeant sat with me at lunch in the chow hall, and he said, 'I feel like I'm in a fish bowl, the way all the men's eyes are boring into your back.' I told him, 'That's what my life is like.'

Misogyny has always been at the root of sexual violence in the military, but two other factors contribute to it, as well: the type of man who chooses to enter the all-volunteer force and the nature of the Iraq War.

The economic reasons behind enlistment are well understood. The military is the primary path out of poverty and dead-end jobs for many of the poor in America. What is less discussed is that many soldiers enlist as teenagers to escape troubled or violent homes. Two studies of Army and Marine recruits, one conducted in 1996 by psychologists L.N. Rosen and L. Martin, and the other in 2005 by Jessica Wolfe and her colleagues of the Boston Veterans Affairs Health Center, both of which were published in the journal *Military Medicine*, found that half the male enlistees had been physically abused in childhood, one-sixth had been sexually abused, and 11 percent had experienced both. This is significant because, as psychologists have long known, childhood abuse often turns men into abusers.

In the '70s, when the women's movement brought general awareness of rape to a peak, three men — criminologist Menachim Amir and psychologists Nicholas Groth and Gene Abel — conducted separate but groundbreaking studies of imprisoned rapists. They found that rapists are not motivated by out-of-control lust, as is widely thought, but by a mix of anger, sexual sadism and the need to dominate — urges that are usually formed in childhood. Therefore, the best way to understand a rapist is to think of him as a torturer who uses sex as a weapon to degrade and destroy his victims. This is just as true of a soldier rapist as it is of a civilian who rapes.

Nobody has yet proven that abusive men like this seek out the military — attracted by its violent culture — but several scholars suspect that this is so, including the aforementioned Morris and Rutgers University law professor Elizabeth L. Hillman, author of a forthcoming paper on sexual violence in the military. Hillman writes, "There is ... the possibility that the demographics of the all-volunteer force draw more rape-prone men into uniform as compared to civil society."

Worse, according to the Defense Department's own reports, the military has been exacerbating the problem by granting an increasing number of "moral waivers" to its recruits since 9/11, which means enlisting men with records of domestic and sexual violence.

Furthermore, the military has an abysmal record when it comes to catching, prosecuting and punishing its rapists. The Pentagon's 2007 Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military found that 47 percent of the reported sexual assaults in 2007 were dismissed as unworthy of investigation, and only about 8 percent of the cases went to court-martial, reflecting the difficulty female soldiers have in making themselves heard or believed when they report sexual assault within the military. The majority of assailants were given what the Pentagon calls "nonjudicial punishments, administrative actions and discharges." By contrast, in civilian life, 40 percent of those accused of sex crimes are prosecuted.

Which brings us to the question: Do the reasons soldiers rape have anything to do with the nature of the wars we are waging today, particularly in Iraq?

Robert Jay Lifton, a professor of psychiatry who studies war crimes, theorizes that soldiers are particularly prone to commit atrocities in a war of brutal occupation, where the enemy is civilian resistance, the command sanctions torture, and the war is justified by distorted reasoning and obvious lies.

Thus, many American troops in Iraq have deliberately shot children, raped civilian women and teenagers, tortured prisoners of war, and abused their own comrades because they see no moral justification for the war, and are reduced to nothing but self-loathing, anger, fear and hatred.

Although these explanations for why soldiers rape are dispiriting, they do at least suggest that the military could institute the following reforms:

- Promote and honor more women soldiers. The more respect women are shown by the command, the less abuse they will get from their comrades.
- Teach officers and enlistees that rape is torture and a war crime.
- Expel men from the military who attack their female comrades.
- Ban the consumption of pornography.
- Prohibit the use of sexist language by drill instructors.
- Educate officers to insist that women be treated with respect.
- Train military counselors to help male and female soldiers not only with war trauma, but also with childhood abuse and sexual assault.
- Cease admitting soldiers with backgrounds of domestic or sexual violence.

And last — but far from least — end the war in Iraq.

This article is adapted from *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*, to be published by Beacon Press in April 2009.

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