

# Culture of Unpunished Sexual Assault in U.S. Military

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## **Marfa, Texas — Sexual assault of women serving in the U.S. military, while brought to light in recent reports, has a long tradition in that institution.**

Women in America were first allowed into the military during the Revolutionary War in 1775, and their travails are as old.

Maricela Guzman served in the Navy from 1998 to 2002 as a computer technician on the island of Diego Garcia, and later in Naples, Italy. She was raped while in boot camp, but was too scared to talk about the assault for the rest of her time in the military.

In her own words she, “survived by becoming a workaholic. Fortunately or unfortunately the military took advantage of this, and I was much awarded as a soldier for my work ethic.”

Guzman decided to dissociate from the military on witnessing the way it treated the native population in Diego Garcia. Post discharge, her life became unmanageable. The effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from her rape had taken a heavy toll.

After undergoing a divorce, a failed suicide attempt and homelessness, she moved in with her parents. A chance encounter with a female veteran at a political event in Los Angeles prompted her to contact the veteran’s administration (VA) for help. She began seeing a therapist there who diagnosed her with PTSD from her rape.

She told IPS that the VA denied her claim nevertheless, “Because they said I couldn’t prove it ... since I had not brought it up when it happened and also because I had not shown any deviant behaviour while in the service. I was outraged and felt compelled to talk about what happened.”

Like countless others, Guzman learned early that the culture of the military promoted silence about sexual assault. Her experience over the years has convinced her that sexual violence is a systemic problem in the military.

“It has been happening since women were allowed into the service and will continue to happen after Iraq and Afghanistan,” Guzman told IPS, “Through the gossip mill we would hear of women who had reported being raped. No confidentiality was maintained nor any protection given to them making them susceptible to fresh attacks.”

“The boys’ club culture is strong and the competition exclusive,” Guzman added, “To get ahead women have to be better than men. That forces many not to report rape, because it is a blemish and can ruin your career.”

She is not hopeful of any radical change in policy anytime soon, but, "One good thing that has come out of this war is that people want to talk about this now."

More than 190,000 female soldiers have served thus far in Iraq and Afghanistan on the front lines, often having to confront sexual assault and harassment from their own comrades in arms.

The VA's PTSD centre claims that the incidence of rape, assault, and harassment were higher in wartime during the 1991 U.S. attack on Iraq than during peacetime. Thus far, the numbers from Iraq show a continuance, and increase, of this disturbing trend.

The military is notorious for its sexist and misogynistic culture. Drill instructors indoctrinate new recruits by routinely calling them "girl," "pussy," "bitch," and "dyke." Pornography is prevalent, and misogynistic rhymes have existed for decades.

Understandably, Department of Defense (DoD) numbers for sexual assaults in the military are far lower than numbers provided by other sources, primarily because the Pentagon only counts rapes that soldiers have officially reported. Even according to the Pentagon, 80 percent of assaults go unreported.

Pentagon spokesperson Cynthia Smith told IPS, "We understand this is very important for everyone to get involved in preventing sexual assault, and are calling on everyone to get involved, step in, and watch each others' backs."

According to the DoD Report on Sexual Assault in the Military for Fiscal Year 2007, "There were 2,688 total reports of sexual assault involving Military Service Members," of which "The Military Services completed a total of 1,955 criminal investigations on reports made during or prior to FY07."

The criminal investigations yielded the shockingly low number of only 181 courts martial. "We understand that one sex assault is too many in the DoD," Smith told IPS, "We have an office working on prevention and response."

A 1995 study published in the Archives of Family Medicine found that 90 percent of female veterans from the 1991 U.S. attack on Iraq and earlier wars had been sexually harassed. A 2003 survey of women veterans from the period encompassing Vietnam and the 1991 Iraq attack, published in the American Journal of Industrial Medicine, found that 30 percent of the women soldiers said they were raped.

In 2004, a study of veterans from Vietnam and all wars since, published in the journal of Military Medicine, found that 71 percent of the women were sexually assaulted or raped while serving.

At the 2006 National Convention of Veterans for Peace in Seattle, April Fitzsimmons, who early in her career was raped by a soldier, met with 45 other female vets, and began compiling information.

"I asked for a show of hands of women veterans who had been assaulted while on duty, and half the women raised their hands," Fitzsimmons told IPS, "So I knew we had to do something."

She, along with other women veterans like Guzman, founded the Service Women’s Action Network (SWAN) to help military women who have been victims of sexual violence.

It is an uphill battle for women in the U.S. military to take on the system that clearly represses attempts to change it.

“When victims come forward, they are ostracised, doubted, and isolated from their communities,” Fitzsimmons told IPS, “Many of the perpetrators are officers who use their ranks to coerce women to sleep with them. It’s a closely interwoven community, so the perpetrators are safe within the system and can fearlessly move free amongst their victims.”

Fitzsimmons shared with IPS a view that underscores the gravity of the problem.

“The crisis is so severe that I’m telling women to simply not join the military because it’s completely unsafe and puts them at risk. Until something changes at the top, no woman should join the military.”

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**Sidebar: Two Testimonies**

**April Fitzsimmons** served in the Air Force from 1985 to 1989, as an intelligence analyst and intelligence briefer for a two-star general. Early in her military career, another soldier sexually assaulted her.

Nineteen years old at the time of her rape, Fitzsimmons reported the assault, and named her perpetrator, who was removed from the base. However, she declined the offer of counselling “because there was a stigma attached to it,” she told IPS.

“Those who seek counselling are perceived to be at risk, as being too weak and vulnerable and it would have meant forfeiting my top-secret clearance to keep military intelligence classified,” she explained.

Another reason for maintaining silence on the matter was that Fitzsimmons was declared “airman (sic) of the year,” in the European command.

“I didn’t want to lose that,” she says, “I wanted the whole thing to go away.”

Fitzsimmons created a one-woman play, *Need to Know*, which has been running for six years. In the play, she addresses her own sexual assault in the military. When news of rapes and sexual assaults by U.S. soldiers in Iraq, against both other soldiers and Iraqis began to surface, Fitzsimmons became more active.

“After reading about the 14-year-old Iraqi girl, Abeer Qasim Hamza, who was raped by several soldiers, and about Suzanne Swift, a soldier who after being raped by another U.S. soldier went AWOL (absent without leave) rather than redeploy with the command that was responsible for allowing the rape to occur, I was convinced that there was a cycle of sexual violence in the military that was neither being seen nor addressed,” she says.

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It is not difficult to ascertain the reason for so few sexual assaults being reported in the military. **Jen Hogg** of the New York Army National Guard told IPS, "I helped a woman report a sexual assault while she was in basic training. She was grabbed between the legs from behind while going up stairs. She was not able to pinpoint the person who did it."

Hogg explained that her friend was afraid to report the incident to her drill sergeant, and went on to explain why, which also sheds light on why so many women opt not to report being sexually assaulted.

"During training, the position of authority the drill sergeant holds makes any and all reporting a daunting task, and most people are scared to even approach him or her," Hogg told IPS, "In this case, the drill sergeant's response was swift but caused resentment towards the female that made the report, because her identity was not hidden from males who were punished as a whole for the one."

The incident displays another tactic used in the military to suppress women's reportage of being sexually assaulted - that of not respecting their anonymity, which opens them up to further assaults.

"After this incident many of the males said harassing things to her as they passed her during training, so much so that she regretted having addressed the issue," Hogg continued, "You can be ostracised as the woman who had dared to speak up. Women willing to speak up are trained to shut up, which results in an atmosphere of silence. After my experiences in basic and advanced individual training I never reported an incident again."

Hogg herself faced verbal sexual harassment.

"When I removed my protective top in the heat I would often hear comments such as 'where you been hiding them puppies' in reference to my breasts."

Based on her friends' experience, Hogg did not even consider reporting.

To make matters worse, according to Department of Defense statistics, 84-85 percent of soldiers convicted of rape or sexual assault leave the military with honourable discharges. Not only are they not penalised, they are honoured.

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