

# CAME TO SERVE, LEFT BETRAYED

## Violence Against Women in the Military

by Kristen M. Reinhardt, M.S., PhD candidate, Department of Psychology (Clinical Psychology)

Experiences of military sexual trauma (MST) are associated with a significant burden of mental and physical health symptoms among female veterans (Kimerling et al., 2008) and occur at alarmingly high rates (Street et al., 2013). These findings suggest that there are aspects of the military setting that may facilitate the occurrence of and/or impede recovery from these experiences. This report focuses on a subset of participants (nine in total) from the larger qualitative study funded by CSWS. Here, the focus is on female veteran MST survivors' perceptions of military culture and how it impacted their military service experience. We addressed this research topic with the following two questions asked to participants: 1) What was it like to be a woman in the military? 2) Do you think anything about the military (e.g. culture, environment, or policies) contributed to your experiences of MST?

### METHOD

Twenty-one female veterans who reported unwanted sexual experiences during military service were eligible for this study. Results from nine participants are presented here. Female study staff interviewed participants with a semi-structured interview.

### ANALYSES

We conducted preliminary rapid content analyses using a method rooted in Grounded Theory (Creswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), involving coding written transcripts for themes.

### RESULTS

#### **Being a woman in the military:**

Many women noted that there were unique challenges associated with being a woman in the military. Here, we focus on the two most common themes: women defined as sexual objects and the belief that women cannot be competent service members.

#### **Women defined as sexual objects:**

Five participants indicated that, in the military, women were defined,

almost exclusively, as sexual objects. Participants recalled frequent unwanted sexual attention, being labeled with sexually derogative terms (e.g., fresh meat), and being forced into limited roles based on their sexual behavior (e.g., You're either a bitch, a dyke, or a slut.).

My chief said, "You know what your problem is?" He says, "You're female. They're only meant for two things. Whores and home-making. And you haven't figured out which one. Until you settle on that you're really going to have a hard time around here." (P4)

#### **Impact of military culture on MST:**

Participants provided thoughtful responses to questions regarding aspects of the military culture, environment, or policies that contributed to experiences of MST. Here we focus on the three most common themes: issues related to the military power structure, a need for training related to sexual trauma prevention, and insensitive treatment following sexual trauma.

#### **Issues related to military power structure:**

Four participants noted that the military power structure, including the rank system, contributed to an environment that facilitated the occurrence of sexual trauma.

[In reference to rank.] I think that's the main thing. ... Oh yeah, if you get the rank, you've got the power. (P7)

#### **A need for training related to sexual trauma prevention:**

Four participants indicated the importance of more and/or better training related to sexual assault prevention.

I realized when you do these trainings a lot of it's just a joke. They do it because they have to do it. But do they really believe it? No. Do they really sell it? No. (P5)

#### **Insensitive treatment following sexual trauma:**

Six participants shared examples of insensitive interactions with military mem-

bers or the military system that contributed to their difficulties in coping with experiences of sexual trauma. Specific subthemes included difficulties with the formal reporting process (e.g., I didn't have anyone or any place to go to) including threats of retaliation following reporting, difficulty escaping the perpetrator (e.g., I didn't have the freedom to go to another duty assignment), and a lack of understanding of the psychological consequences of sexual assault.

I wouldn't say it was his chain of command, but I would say it was his associates who were the ones that intimidated me and threatened to put me in the brig if I said anything. (P2)

### DISCUSSION

Although these findings are preliminary, this investigation is one of the first to explore MST survivors' beliefs about aspects of the military setting that may have contributed to their unwanted sexual experiences or their distress following these experiences. The use of a qualitative data methodology allowed for the examination of women veterans' perceptions of how the military context impacted their experiences of sexual trauma in a way that is difficult to address using quantitative methodologies. Many of the issues raised by MST survivors are also confronted by some civilian sexual trauma survivors (e.g., women defined as sexual objects, insensitive treatment following sexual trauma) although the scope and intensity of these issues may be more prominent in military settings.

### CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This information has direct applications for behavioral health providers working with MST survivors and may be particularly relevant for addressing patients' assumptions about why the MST occurred. A subgroup of participants denied that the military system played any role in their MST experiences. Future analyses will investigate differences



across the experiences of these participants. We will also focus more extensively on experiences of interpersonal and institutional betrayal, including a disconnect between expectations of military service and actual military service. ■

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