



Misogyny Rampant in the Armed Forces: 1 in 3 Military Women Experience Sexual Abuse

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I knew it was bad, but I didn't know just how bad. Colonel Ann Wright, retired U.S. Army, grabbed the audience's attention at a panel called Women in the Military, hosted last month by Women Center Stage in New York City, when she said that one in three women in the military is sexually abused by her male colleagues. Ann wants to see huge signs displaying this statistic in every recruiting office, to let young women know what to expect if they sign up.

After 26 years in the U.S. Army/Army Reserves, Ann went on to serve in the U.S. Diplomatic Corps for fifteen years, receiving the State Department's Award for Heroism in 1997. She helped open the U.S. embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, in January 2002 and then was Deputy Chief of Mission in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. But in 2003 she resigned from the Diplomatic Corps, saying, "I have served my country for almost thirty years in the some of the most isolated and dangerous parts of the world. However, I do not believe in the policies of this Administration," referring to the invasion of Iraq. Since then, she has advocated tirelessly for peace.

She described first hand accounts from witnesses and seeing photographs that document an atrocious rape that ended in the murder of a female US soldier in Iraq, which the military had reported as a suicide. She pointed out that even in the handful of cases resulting in court martial and conviction, few perpetrators have served any prison time.

Two other young veterans, Kelly Dougherty and Jen Hogg, described life in the military for women today.

Sgt. Kelly Dougherty, now Executive Director of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) and former chair of its Board of Directors, told of a veteran who calmly described killing an Iraqi while she breast-fed her baby. To Kelly, this was just one example of the incredible disconnect veterans live with and of the brutalization that everyone in the armed forces is subjected to. She noted, however, that this is new for women, since for the first time in US history so many women are participating in combat

situations.

Sgt. Jennifer Hogg of IVAW and Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) explained that women are automatically excluded from the infantry because they are considered unfit to do on-the-ground fighting. Jennifer granted that while some but not all women aren't suitable for infantry service, some men aren't capable either. She declared that categorically excluding women from the infantry is not only arbitrary but another of the many visible ways that women in the military are regarded as second-class citizens, ripe for abuse.

It's not just a matter of promotions. Women are given only the basic training that everyone receives; they do not get advanced infantry training. However in the everyday reality of the Iraq occupation, women are routinely thrust into situations that require infantry skills. They then find themselves in combat situations for which they are not prepared.

However, the greatest danger that military women in Iraq and Afghanistan face is from their male peers and officers. More women there are the victims of sexual assault than of injuries from hazardous military duties. Reuters reported as far back as 1995, "Ninety percent of women under 50 who have served in the US military and who responded to a survey report being victims of sexual harassment, and nearly one-third of the respondents of all ages say they have been raped."

Blatant sexism and misogyny are at the root of this high rate of violence against these women who just want to defend their country.

Some military training actually encourages violence thus adding greatly to the inherent violence of war. Jennifer described training while "jodies" were ringing in her ears -- the cadences that sing about a soldier's trashy girlfriend having sex with a civilian who is not as good a man as he. She first heard these chants while serving as a mechanic in the New York Army National Guard from 2000-2005. The "jodies" were crafted to engender men's rage: at women, at non-military men and at "the other."

According to Jennifer, some men join the army for honor but also to belong to a group that permits them to express their aggression. She questions whether such motivations are any different than those of the young men who join gangs. So, she asked, why would we be surprised when these super-aggressive men behave brutally toward Iraqi civilians or towards women?

She says most of their male counterparts view women in the military as either "dykes," "whores," or "bitches." These women must cope with these grotesque distortions on a daily basis.

Kelly, who served as a medic and in a military police unit, says that misogyny is rampant and seldom countered from above. She described how bitter that is when a woman knows that the first duty of an officer is to care for those in her or his command. She is convinced that officers' failure to protect the women serving under them has contributed fundamentally to the serious breakdown of good military operations in Iraq. Betrayal by one's own chain of command is devastating to women, and ultimately, everyone suffers.

Kelly and Jennifer both also noted the lack of female solidarity, declaring that women simply cannot bond in that culture. (I had to remind myself that the men in this culture cannot bond with their peers to resist certain kinds of abuses either.) In August of 2006 at Camp Casey I heard such first hand accounts from returning male veterans. One watched a peer shooting Iraqi children from their vehicle, much as some boys will shoot animals. Though horrified, he says that in this environment, he was neither able to stop that marine nor could he come to the defense of a comrade who tried to stop him.

So it is not surprising that in this environment, women seldom come to one another's defense. Women who report abuse are often punished instead of helped, creating even greater fear among their peers.

Neither Jennifer nor Kelly thinks that having more women officers at higher ranks would change anything. They say the "divide to conquer" system, which begins by conquering U.S. recruits' moral values, permeates the military.

Jennifer brought up another issue; as a lesbian, she knew discrimination had started when the "don't ask, don't tell" provisions were read to her before she signed up.

Already in the Army National Guard, she was activated for duty on September 11th. Surrounded by soldiers hugging and kissing loved ones before being deployed, Jennifer's partner was unable to support her in the same way. By then, having already been exposed to the "jodies," Jennifer became increasingly aware of the system's brutality and the many injustices it perpetrates.

In every area women are not treated as equals, not respected. "The shoes for women are of poorer quality and women's uniforms fit tightly to emphasize her body," Jennifer told us.

Since mechanics and welders are deployed as infantry, from which women are excluded, Jennifer was not deployed as a mechanic even though she was qualified. She ultimately left the service, unable to reconcile her conscience with the treatment

of minorities, the injustices, and the invasion. She now works in the GI peace movement.

Like many young people from blue-collar communities, Jennifer turned to the military for opportunities. She trained as a mechanic, a field that few women enter or consider a likely occupation for such a small, beautiful young woman.

Ann pointed out that many recruits join for the education they can get. "Almost no one joins the military because they want to kill people," she commented. Both Kelly, who went to college, and Jennifer, who learned a trade, received their educations as a result of military service.

Traditionally, the U.S. military has been good to its veterans, providing not only education but health care and good retirement. However my friends at Camp Casey decried the "economic draft" that exists today: working class young people with little future sign up disproportionately.

Ann suggests that if there were another kind of national service, many of these young people would never enlist. If the United States offered free post secondary education to qualified persons like other developed nations do, the number of young people who enlist would be greatly reduced.

All three women are proud of their military service. Though appalled at the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, they still feel very connected to the military. Kelly expressed sadness and disappointment that people who see her wearing her military jacket remark that it must belong to her boyfriend or husband. She served at great risk to her own life in Hungary, Croatia and Iraq and is now using her skills to stop the abuse of her service by the very people who should respect its integrity.

I would not have understood the pride these women feel about their service before I went to Camp Casey.

As my friend, Patrice Schexnayder of Texas Impact, an interfaith group working for justice, said: "The military at its best is not about weapons that destroy buildings and the life within, photographed by satellite or spy plane, and totally bloodless, all in the name of aggression. It is about staying awake and on guard, while others sleep."

Kelly and Jennifer were key organizers of the Winter Soldier event in March. Their skillful negotiation made the session on gender in the military possible in spite of initial resistance by some of their male colleagues. They spoke of it as a beginning, an opening of the door. I think it is a major victory.

The three women veterans of this panel are true Warriors, horrified at the way the U. S. uses their service in Iraq and Afghanistan, but nonetheless willing to serve to protect us.

It was a privilege to hear these women tell their stories.

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