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Sexual Violence in the US Military

The issue of sexual violence within the United States military has become an urgent and critical concern that extends far beyond individual experiences, impacting military effectiveness, unit cohesion, and the overall well-being of service members. Despite a variety of reforms and initiatives launched over the years to combat this troubling issue, recent statistics reveal that sexual assault and harassment persist at shocking levels, affecting both male and female personnel in active duty roles.

According to the latest reports from the U.S. Department of Defense, thousands of military personnel are victimized each year, and many of these former victims endure profound psychological trauma that can last long after their service has ended. The complexity of this problem is exacerbated by numerous challenges surrounding the reporting process, where many victims face significant hurdles in coming forward. Fear of retaliation is a common deterrent; victims often worry about the potential consequences, including social ostracism, professional repercussions, and doubts about being believed by peers and superiors.

Additionally, systemic barriers within the military justice system further impede victims from seeking justice. Cultural norms and a prevailing sense of loyalty to one's unit can discourage reporting, while inadequate support structures leave many victims isolated and unsupported. This report aims to thoroughly investigate the current landscape of sexual violence in the U.S. military, providing an in-depth examination of prevalence rates, the challenges faced when attempting to report incidents, the retaliatory practices that discourage victims from speaking out, and the existing barriers that obstruct justice. By illuminating these pressing issues, we hope to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse around military culture and advocate for the necessary reforms that will help create a safer and more equitable environment for all service members.

In this report, we will address the issue of sexual violence in the US military.

1. According to the 2021 report by the U.S. Department of Defense, approximately 8.4% of women and 1.5% of men in active military service have been sexually assaulted. This figure indicates that about 35,900 military



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personnel (19,300 women and 16,600 men) have been victims of this type of violence. This number is increasing, showing that the problem remains serious despite policy changes. The same report also states that 24% of women and 6% of men in active military service have reported experiencing sexual harassment. By racial breakdown, approximately 17.9% of Black women in the U.S. military have reported experiencing sexual harassment. Non-Hispanic white women reported the highest rate at 27.5%. Research has shown that continuous sexual harassment increases the likelihood of it escalating to physical violence and assault.¹

2. American military women face higher rates of sexual assault compared to their male counterparts. In 2018, approximately 6.2% of women in the U.S. military were victims of sexual assault, while this rate for men was 0.7%. The highest rates of sexual assault occur among women aged 17 to 24 and lower-ranking personnel.²
3. Despite efforts to encourage reporting of sexual assaults, many victims in the U.S. military do not report these incidents. In 2018, about 76.1% of sexual assault victims in the U.S. military did not report the incident to authorities. Factors such as fear of retaliation, concerns about confidentiality, and distrust in the effectiveness of the reporting system are primary reasons for this underreporting.³
4. Many victims who report sexual assault in the U.S. military face retaliation. In 2018, about 66% of military personnel who reported sexual assault experienced some form of retaliation from colleagues or superiors. This retaliation may take professional, social, or administrative actions, which deters other victims from reporting and reinforcing a culture of silence.⁴
5. According to the RAND Corporation, women who are victims of sexual assault in the U.S. military are 22% more likely to leave the military compared to others. For men, this figure is 15%. Sexual assault not only has psychological impacts but also decreases team cohesion and trust in commanders within the U.S. military. In many cases, neglecting sexual assault and failing to prosecute offenders reduces morale and performance among soldiers, ultimately jeopardizing operational readiness.⁵
6. Studies have shown that 62% of sexual assaults in the U.S. military involve alcohol consumption by the victim, the perpetrator, or both. Excessive alcohol consumption is widespread among young military personnel. Social and cultural pressures to drink, especially during ceremonies and training periods, increase soldiers' vulnerability to sexual violence. Despite efforts to limit alcohol consumption on military bases, many sexual assaults occur in environments where alcohol is prevalent. Experts believe that without stricter

¹ https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/public/docs/reports/FY21_Annual_Report.pdf

² https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TLA746-2/handbook/resources/data-on-sexual-assault-in-the-military.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³ https://www.protectourdefenders.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MSA-Fact-Sheet-2020_FINAL-2.pdf

⁴ https://www.protectourdefenders.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MSA-Fact-Sheet-2020_FINAL-2.pdf

⁵ <https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TLA746-2/handbook/resources/data-on-sexual-assault-in-the-military.html>



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enforcement of alcohol control laws in the U.S. military, reducing sexual assaults will be unlikely.⁶

7. Despite thousands of annual reports of sexual assault and violence in the U.S. military, only a minimal number of these cases lead to prosecution or conviction. According to the 2021 Department of Defence (DoD) report, only about 7% of sexual assault cases result in conviction. Most of these cases are either dismissed, resolved through administrative actions, or lead to no punishment. One of the main problems is that the military justice system allows commanders to decide whether a case should be pursued. Many victims believe this structure leads to biased decision-making, as commanders may be more inclined to support the offenders—especially if they are effective and prominent personnel. Even when cases go to court, the conviction rate is low. A 2020 report from Protect Our Defenders found that military prosecutors often lack sufficient resources or independence to effectively handle sexual assault cases. Many survivors who report assaults face case dismissals due to “insufficient evidence,” even when credible testimonies are provided. Advocates for reform argue that sexual assault cases should be reviewed by independent legal professionals, not commanders. In 2021, Congress passed the Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act, aiming to remove sexual assault cases from the chain of command, but its implementation is still progressing slowly.⁷
8. Military Sexual Trauma (MST) refers to the psychological and physical consequences of sexual assault or harassment during military service. This trauma can have severe long-term effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimates that among veterans using VA healthcare services in the U.S., at least one in three women and one in fifty men have experienced this trauma. Many survivors struggle with PTSD symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, and hypervigilance, making it extremely difficult for them to reintegrate into civilian life. In addition to psychological issues, survivors of MST often suffer from chronic physical problems, including persistent pain, digestive disorders, and reproductive health issues. Many of these problems are linked to the severe stress and emotional trauma associated with sexual violence.⁸
9. Many survivors of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) in the U.S. military do not receive adequate support. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has special programs to support MST survivors, but many U.S. veterans face bureaucratic barriers in accessing these services. Some encounter scepticism from healthcare staff or have difficulty proving their assault due to a lack of formal documentation.⁹

⁶ https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/public/docs/reports/FY21_Annual_Report.pdf

⁷ <https://www.protectourdefenders.com/>

⁸ https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/mst_general_factsheet.pdf

⁹ https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/mst_general_factsheet.pdf



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10. Sexual violence is also a serious problem in U.S. military academies, where cadets face high rates of sexual harassment and assault. A 2022 Department of Defence report showed that one in five female cadets in U.S. military academies were victims of sexual assault during the 2021-2022 academic year, the highest rate recorded in over a decade. In military academies, sexual violence often goes unreported because victims fear negative repercussions for their future careers and the highly hierarchical culture of these institutions. Many cadets worry that reporting an assault will damage their reputation, lead to expulsion from the academy, or negatively impact their future military careers. The frequent occurrence of such incidents at institutions like West Point, the U.S. Naval Academy, and the U.S. Air Force Academy indicates leadership failures in creating a safe environment. Despite the implementation of prevention programs, the rate of sexual assault in academies continues to rise, raising concerns about the effectiveness of current policies.¹⁰

Recommendations:

Sexual violence remains a serious issue within the United States military. Despite efforts to combat this crisis, reports show that the rate of reporting remains low, victims face retaliation, and the organizational culture of the U.S. military often avoids punishing offenders. As a global human rights defender, the United Nations can significantly encourage the U.S. government to adopt more effective measures. Here are some recommendations to address sexual violence in the U.S. military:

1. *Establish an Independent Reporting System*

Currently, reports of sexual harassment and assault in the U.S. military are reviewed through the chain of command, leading to conflicts of interest and fear of retaliation. The United Nations should urge the U.S. to create an independent, civilian body to review and investigate these cases.

2. *Strengthen Legal Protections for Victims*

Numerous legal barriers prevent victims from achieving justice. The United Nations should advocate for legal reforms so that U.S. military personnel accused of sexual violence are tried in civilian courts instead of military tribunals, which have a poor track record of convicting offenders.

3. *Ensure Commanders' Accountability*

¹⁰ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/sexual-assault-reports-military-academies-rise-worst-2006/story?id=97779959>



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Commanders who fail to address reports of sexual violence in the U.S. military should face serious consequences. The U.S. military should implement strict accountability mechanisms for commanders who ignore, conceal, or mismanage reports.

4. Improve Educational and Awareness Programs

Current U.S. training programs focus more on superficial awareness rather than cultural change. The United Nations should emphasize comprehensive and ongoing education, including bystander intervention, informed consent training, and understanding the psychological impacts of sexual violence in the military.

5. Increase Protection Against Retaliation

Many victims in the U.S. military remain silent due to fear of retaliation. Stronger legal protections and mechanisms are needed to protect victims and witnesses from threats, harassment, or career damage.

6. Expand Support Services for Victims

The United Nations should actively pursue the U.S. military's allocation of more funds to victim support services, including confidential counseling, medical care, legal assistance, and financial support for those who must leave service due to assault-related injuries.

7. Enhance Oversight and Transparency

The U.S. Department of Defense should be required to publish independent reports on sexual violence cases, the effectiveness of measures taken, and the levels of punishment applied to increase transparency and accountability.

8. Create a Victim Support Network

With the support of the United Nations, a network of former and current U.S. military personnel who have experienced sexual violence should be established to advise policymakers, aid in military training, and support victims through peer support.

9. Implement Zero-Tolerance Policies

The U.S. military culture often ignores or downplays sexual violence. A clear and uncompromising policy on sexual violence should be developed, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of rank and position, face severe consequences for such offenses.



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10. Conduct Independent Inspections of Military Bases

Many sexual violence incidents occur on military bases, where the command structure often suppresses reporting. The U.S. should allow independent U.N. inspectors to evaluate the prevalence of sexual violence and the effectiveness of preventive measures on military bases.

11. Focus on the Link Between Sexual Violence and PTSD

Many victims of sexual violence in the U.S. military suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The United Nations should urge the U.S. military to prioritize mental health services and ensure that victims of sexual violence receive full therapeutic and supportive benefits.

12. Increase Collaboration with Experts and NGOs

The U.S. military should work closely with civilian organizations specializing in the prevention of sexual violence, victim support, and legal assistance. These collaborations can provide more resources and hold the military accountable for its actions.