

Military Sexual Trauma
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[Introduction](#)

Joyce Boaz, the director of Gift From Within, asked me to write this article. We especially hope that if you've suffered military sexual trauma (MST) it will inform you in a way that contributes to your recovery. If you're the partner, friend, or family member of an MST victim, we hope that it will assist you in learning how to be an intelligent, sensitive caregiver.

The article assumes that you're familiar with the term post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If you're not you may first want to read articles on this website by Frank Ochberg, M.D. His articles provide comprehensive explanations of PTSD along with more suggestions about how to help your partner if she or he is struggling with PTSD.

<http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/partners.html> ;

<http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/Frequently-Asked-Questions-on-PTSD-Help-with-PTSD.html>

[What is Military Sexual Trauma?](#)

The National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder defines military sexual trauma as referring to both the sexual harassment and sexual assault that occurs in military settings. Sexual harassment is unwelcome verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that occurs in the workplace or in an academic training setting. Gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion are examples of sexual harassment. Sexual assault is any sort of sexual activity between at least two people in which one of the people is involved against her or his will. Unwanted touching, grabbing, oral sex, and sexual penetration are examples of sexual assault. Both men and women are victims of military sexual trauma, and it includes domestic violence as well as assaults while on active duty and/or hardship tours.

This particular article will focus on women. But it is also important for you to know that MST is a serious problem among men as well. In fact, the high victimization rate of female soldiers has helped to shed light on men assaulting other men (Ellison, 2011). An article for our website which will focus on men is in the planning stages. In the meantime, we've noted several support resources for men in the end of this article, and you may also want to take a look at an informative article by Jesse

Ellison entitled *The Military's Secret Shame*, in the April 11, 2011 issue of Newsweek.

The Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, Fiscal Year 2010, stated that 90% of victims are women, 10% are men, the vast majority are under age 25, and are from the enlisted ranks. The single strongest predictor of PTSD for women in the armed services is military sexual trauma, and sexual harassment causes the same rates of PTSD in women as combat does for men (Natelson, 8/05/10).

How pervasive is MST?

Let's first take a look at some statistics:

- In 2008, 2,900 sexual assaults were reported. This was a 9% increase overall, and a 26% increase in war zones from the 2007 calculations (Lasker, 2011).
- In 2009 there were 3,230 reports of sexual assaults which was an 11% increase across armed forces from the previous year, with a 33% increase in war zones (Lasker, 2011).
- In 2010, there were 3,292 reports of sexual assault involving a service member. (Lasker, 2011)
- In the past 30 years the number of women in the armed services has doubled, and they now compose 14% of the active-duty forces (Rogers, 2011).
- At least 250, 000 American women have served in Iraq and Afghanistan (Rogers, 2011)
- 80% of assault victims fail to report the offense. (Natelson, 8/05/10)

In 2008 Rep. Jane Harmon, Member of the House Homeland Security Committee, made a jolting statement reported online by ABC NEWS: THE BLOTTER – a statement that continues to be true: “A woman who signs up to protect her country is more likely to be raped by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire.”

(<http://www.abcnews.go.com/blotter> , 9/10/08, and www.thedailybeast.com, 4/11/11).

As one suffering victim of military sexual trauma told me:

“It’s brutal trying to recover from these things. Remember, when we enter the armed services we go into a situation where we’re told ‘You joined this family. look to your left... this is your brother or sister...Look to your right...this is your brother or sister. Look at me...I’m your parent,’ ...And then it happens to you.

Let’s say your commanding officer rapes you, for instance, or one or more of your fellow soldiers harasses you regularly and rapes you multiple times...on the News they talk about it as if it happens once...sometimes it does, and that’s traumatic...many times it doesn’t, but goes on and on...In my situation it went on for 2 ½ years. And I kept wondering what was wrong with me? What’s my deficiency, if my brother singled me out? I was serving, doing my job, and having to see my perpetrator everyday...it was continual trauma...I would eat with him, drink with him, sleep in close quarters with him, work with him, go to the field with him, do activities with him...sometimes his friends would make jokes about me...I felt like his concubine.”

Why keep such a secret for years?

Many MST victims keep their experiences a secret for years. Civilians, particularly if they’ve never been sexually assaulted, may question why a victim would make such a choice, but there are several logical, important and overlapping contributing factors:

- Unlike civilians, victims in the armed forces don’t have the luxury of being able to quit their jobs without imprisonment.
- All military service members begin their official time of service by taking an oath at a swearing in ceremony in which they solemnly swear to defend the Constitution of the United States, and to obey the orders of the President of the United States, and the orders of the officers appointed over them. They’re indoctrinated, in training and through the intensity of repetitive life-and-death military operations, to obey without questioning. Their lives and the success of their missions depend on it.

- They're often caught in a situation where they're relying on their perpetrators to provide for their basic needs, including medical and psychological care (Saenz, 2/15/11).
- The reporting protocol has been fraught with impediments. For many years there was no guarantee of confidentiality, it was very difficult for them to obtain benefits, and they were not guaranteed access to military lawyers. Some feared that their telling would impact on their security clearance and availability for deployment (Natelson, 2010).
- A majority of predators have gone free after a victim's report or have merely been essentially slapped on the wrist. Thus, victims learned to take what they saw as their only feasible option: accept their fate and try to deal with it on their own, while not telling anyone (Laker, 2011).
- Military culture, having regarded women as prey or a spoil of war since biblical times, can be extremely hyper-masculine, sexist, and hostile, as exemplified in these marching cadences: "I've seen her stripped/ I've seen her bare/ I've felt her over everywhere." (www.StarTribune.com 12/17/10).
- Most military groups have developed a strong cohesion factor, particularly during combat. The dynamics of cohesion, which are ordinarily a plus in military life, would make disclosure a taboo.
- In many cases the alleged victims were told to keep quiet and forced to continue to live among and work alongside of the people who had assaulted them. This created a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness, thereby setting the victim up to be at risk for further victimization.
- Victims have often been forced to choose between career advancement and protecting themselves from further victimization. Yet, in many cases the perpetrator was not only not punished but also frequently promoted.
- Like many survivors of incest, other forms of sexual abuse and trauma, they dissociated what was happening to them, or repressed the memories -- just couldn't bear to remember what

happened to them until years later, and after they completed their military duty.

What is the VA Doing About it Now?

The Veteran's Health Administration has realized that this is a serious problem which needed a much more comprehensive response than what they had provided in the past. Now the VA's official policy is to provide veterans experiencing MST with free care for all related physical and mental health conditions. In fact, many vets are first diagnosed with MST through the VA's improved diagnostic interview protocols.

The MST victim I quoted earlier, who had described feeling like her perpetrator's concubine, told me that a major turning point for her recovery occurred when she became ill, and homeless and with no medical insurance, she went to a VA Hospital where, as part of her medical care, she was evaluated and treated for MST. She is now a leader, a dedicated activist for the rights and healing of MST survivors.

The Department of Defense (DoD) has also recently partnered with the Rape and Incest National Network, RAINN, www.rainn.org, to provide live, one-to-one advice, support, and information worldwide. This service is confidential and includes 24-hour/day coverage over the phone (877-995-5247), or through the internet, at www.safehelpline.org and text-message capabilities described on RAINN's website. Because I've been familiar with the quality of RAINN for years, I see this as one of the best arrangements the DoD could have chosen. RAINN is our nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization and was voted as "One of America's 100 Best Charities" by *Worth Magazine*.

What if *you* have been a victim of military sexual trauma?

I hope that the material in this article has helped you to understand that you are not alone AND that you are not at fault. Please reach out for help. Take note of the contact information for RAINN in the previous section and get in touch with them for advice and support. It's important for you to get any medical and/or psychological treatment that you may need, and they will be able to lead you in the right direction. If you have a trusted spouse, friend, or family member, turn to them for support as well.

Though your wounds may be invisible, they are real, and it's important for you to give expression to your pain with people who are able to understand and guide you through a path to healing.

Assigning language to your experience will be an important part of your recovery. And relationships that feel emotionally safe are a bottom line need for you, though you are used to being in harm's way. Also, many victims of MST have found support and resources on the internet, especially Facebook.

These sites have been quite popular among women vets. You may find them helpful, comforting, grounding, strengthening, or inspiring:

Facebook pages:

Stop Sexual Abuse and Harassment Against Military Women
Service Women's Action Network
Mothers Against Military Sexual Trauma
MRCC: Supporting Survivors of Military Sexual Trauma

Interesting Website

Fatigues Clothesline www.fatiguesclothesline.com

Websites for men

<http://www.mendmst.org/>

<http://www.equalityunited.org/2010/06/01/hello-world>

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/pages/military-sexual-trauma.asp>

What if your spouse, friend, or family member has experienced military sexual trauma?

Vets who work among MST victims tell me that most don't tell family and friends because it's hard for civilians to understand and believe what happens. It doesn't fit with their image of a military that exemplifies high values. Unless they have previous knowledge or direct personal experience with sexual assaults themselves, they are likely to ask the victim to do the impossible: to leave it all behind and get on with life. Learn from that that you will be different. Do everything you can to understand military culture, post traumatic stress disorder, MST, and your loved one. If your spouse is suffering with MST this may be a particularly sensitive and difficult period of your marriage, but it can also be a period of profound growth, deep love, and healing.

Theater can be powerful catalyst for increased understanding between you and your loved one while bridging the gap between the community and the sense of isolation your loved one may be feeling.

One example, Theater of War Productions, travels to communities around the country:

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/blog/2010/02/wednesday-on-the-newshour-using-drama-to-understand-and-heal-the-wounds-of-war.html>

Another example is playwright Donna Fiumano-Farley's *A Shot Away: Personal Accounts of Military Sexual Trauma*, in New York now:

<http://nytheatre.com/showpage.aspx?s=shot12350> .

Reading also brings empowerment. Begin with the articles on this website that I mentioned in the Introduction:

<http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/partners.html> ;

<http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/Frequently-Asked-Questions-on-PTSD-Help-with-PTSD.html>

Remember to read material in the list of recommended books at the end of this article. Judith Herman's book is a good place to start. Peruse Gift From Within's website for other articles or films that may help you as well. The Trauma Center at Justice Resource Institute

<http://www.traumacenter.org> is another website with a wealth of useful resources.

Conclusion

The reality of sexual trauma in our military services is deeply disturbing, and the needs for healing are both great and of a very personal, intimate nature. Most often these needs, for both the victim and for those who love her, are best addressed by being in therapy with a competent, well-trained therapist combined with the day-to-day support of a strong social network. The therapeutic community and many civilian organizations designed to assist vets with their reintegration here at home, understand that the privilege of being involved in your recovery process is a sacred trust. And the potential for healing increases each time each one of us fulfills our duty to learn, and to honor; to understand and to care.

References

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Recommended Books

Benedict, Helen, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009.

Grant de Pauw, Linda, *Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War from Prehistory to the Present*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.

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