



## *An Advocate's Perspective*

# **Sexual Assault Prevention and Response in the Armed Forces**

by Juliet Walters, Training Director, National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence,  
for the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Total Force

Mr. Chairman and members, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am Juliet Walters, Training Director of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, located in Austin, Texas. Many of you know Debby Tucker, Executive Director of the National Center, who served as co-chair of the Defense Task Force on Domestic Violence (DTFDV). Throughout her service, she and I and other members of our staff debated the commonalities and differences in how domestic and sexual violence must be addressed in both civilian and military communities. The Task Force Report on Care for Victims of Sexual Assault affords an opportunity similar to that of the Defense Task Force, in that it's a blueprint for action. This action will be multi-faceted: a change in the military culture that will prevent sexual assault and a responsive system that seeks to intervene when it does occur.

Based on national statistics on sexual assault prevalence in closed institutions like colleges, we know that sexual assault will occur. Nationally, one in four women and one in ten men are victims of sexual assault. The military, like college campuses, needs to be ready and available to respond to victims.

Attention to sexual violence in the military is refocused now due to the approximately 118 reports (as indicated in the Care for Victims Task Force Report, p. 20) from victims in Iraq, Kuwait, and Afghanistan. However, like the Care for Victims Task Force, the advocacy community is mindful of the many years of analysis and recommendations that have preceded this hearing today. The Care for Victims Task Force provides a chronology (pages 92-96 of its report) of those incidents and actions by Congress, the Department of Defense (DoD), researchers, and advocates that sought to better address this complex issue within DoD.

The work of the Care for Victims Task Force is credible, especially given the short time frame. The findings speak to many of our concerns with the military's response to this problem, and we urge DoD to act upon the recommendations quickly. While doing so, DoD must ask the following:

- How do our policies and procedures support victims?
- How do they create barriers or gaps?
- How will victims enter the system for assistance?
- What happens to victims at each level of our system and across systems?

Simultaneously, DoD will need to address changing a culture that tolerates sexual violence to one that condemns it. Rape is a gender-based crime that is rooted in our society's fundamental

disrespect for women. Even when men are victimized, the male victimizer uses the same language he'd use if the victim were female. It's gendered violence, and that's a hard thing to understand at first. When we focus on the victim and her or his behavior, we support the perpetrator and allow him to continue to humiliate and control others. When we stand by while sexist jokes are told or harassment occurs, we contribute to a sexually violent atmosphere. **(Attachment 1: Continuum of Sexual Aggression handout)**

Currently, a victim of sexual assault in American culture learns the following:

- I will not be believed
- I will be questioned about what I was wearing, where I was, and what I was doing
- People may assume that I invited the assault
- My character will be analyzed
- My word is not good enough
- I may be labeled as "crazy," a "slut," or "vindictive," and therefore not be considered credible
- If I am male, I will likely be viewed as gay and having invited the assault
- Having any social contact with the perpetrator means I have no rights over my body, even if I say "no"

In the military culture, a victim may also have learned that:

- A male soldier's "stress" over being in combat can supercede my health and well-being
- I will be minimized and trivialized
- If I come forward, my career within the military will be compromised

It is imperative that the military focus on culture change by educating all members of the services through training that addresses:

- Sound, easily understood legal definitions of sexual assault and consent
- Use of appropriate language, such as "stranger/non-stranger rape" versus "acquaintance rape" or "date rape"
- Awareness of the fact that the vast majority of sexual assaults are planned and committed by non-strangers
- Encouraging alcohol and drug use is often a premeditated act by a perpetrator and is a risk factor for assault
- Refusing to be a bystander to violence and becoming an ally

Training will also be needed for command, law enforcement, JAGs, chaplains, victim-witness coordinators, victim advocates, and medical personnel to create a response system that meets the needs of victims.

Under the current response, too many victims who do not officially report the crime receive very limited services, or no services at all. Even victims who do report may be "dropped" from assistance if no criminal case is pursued. All victims need medical and emotional support throughout the lengthy healing process, regardless of whether the offender is facing a criminal action.

And too often, when the offender is facing a criminal investigation, there's an undue burden

placed on the victim's testimony along with inadequate gathering of forensic and other evidence. A common attitude -- that sexual assault allegations are falsely made -- impacts the tenor of investigations and the disposition of cases. In fact, less than 4% of felony allegations of crime, including sexual assault, are ultimately discovered to be unfounded.

The intersection of the needs of victims of domestic and sexual violence is most pronounced in the recommendation 4.2 on page 49 of the Task Force's April 2004 report: "provide confidential disclosure." While there is tension around the commanders' need to know (for accountability purposes), we believe that due to a lack of privacy for victims, commanders don't find out about many incidents of violence against women and gender-based violence. With confidential disclosure and supportive services, it's possible that victims will actually tell commanders with more frequency and earlier, resulting in a greater capacity to collect evidence and prosecute offenders.

Congresswoman Slaughter's amendment calls for DoD to put in place comprehensive policies to prevent and respond to sexual assault by January 1, 2005. We applaud the Congressional sentiment that DoD move quickly. As DoD and the Services consider the Report and their own research into existing prevention and intervention approaches, the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence urges you to support a standardized approach. By collaborating across Services to develop policy and training, DoD may more rapidly ensure consistent support to victims and increased offender accountability.

Finally, we at the National Center and other advocacy organizations committed to ending violence against women stand ready to share our experiences and support DoD. DoD must develop responsive, supportive services for victims of sexual assault and eradicate sexual predators in our military. We need a military that understands violence against women, actively seeks to end it within the rank and file, and steps up as a leader to collaborate with us. Together, we can create an America with safety, trust, respect, and honor for all.

Respectfully submitted,

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*Additional information:* The Defense Task Force on Domestic Violence pointed out a relationship between domestic violence and sexual assault and indicated that many of its recommendations could apply to both of these problems. On February 25, 2004, the Defense Task Force provided the Senate Armed Services Committee with detailed information on how its work could apply to sexual assault. (**Attachment 2: Debby Tucker's Senate Armed Services testimony**)

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**Attachment 1: Continuum of Sexual Aggression**

**Attachment 2: Debby Tucker's Senate Armed Services Committee  
testimony, February 2004**