

Opinion: Rape of women in military 'a national disgrace'

By Jackie Speier

Women in the U.S. military are more likely to be raped by fellow soldiers than killed by enemy fire. I know what you're thinking – it sounds too unbelievable to be true. But it's not.

The Department of Defense estimates that more than 19,000 service members were raped or sexually assaulted in 2010. Due to a military culture heavy on retaliation and light on prosecution, only 13.5 percent of the victims report the rape.

The system of justice designed to adjudicate cases of rape in the military is in complete shambles. Victims are blamed. Assailants are promoted. Unit commanders – whose promotions are dependent on the conduct and performance of the soldiers they supervise – have an incentive to see that allegations are few and convictions are fewer. As a result, the overwhelming majority of cases get swept under the rug.

This abomination is not new. The Pentagon has largely ignored the recommendations of 18 reports on sexual assault and rape in the military over the past 16 years. As a result, the problem is now worse than ever. So I have pledged to speak about this issue every week on the floor of the House of Representatives until this Congress and this administration do something more than offer lip service.

While the incidence of rapes and sexual assaults is shockingly high, the personal accounts of victims add even more horror to the picture of a military at war with itself.

Technical Sgt. Mary Gallagher, an Air National Guardsman, was allegedly sexually assaulted by a fellow sergeant in 2009. He pushed her up against a wall, took his right hand and pulled her pants and underwear down, and then used his hand to rub her private parts. He simultaneously ground his genitals against her, and talked about how much he was enjoying the assault. Command's only response was to reassign the assailant and order him to refrain from any contact with her. She was then lectured by the base chaplain, who claimed that 96 percent of sexual assaults on women occur when drinking is involved. Technical Sgt. Gallagher had not been drinking.

Jackie Speier represents San Mateo County and part of San Francisco in the U.S. House of Representatives.

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