

# Military Sexual Trauma: A Little-Known Veteran Issue

by SUSAN KAPLAN

*Fourth in a five-part series*



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Susan Kaplan for NPR

Rachel Caesar left the military after serving for 14 years. She suffered from military sexual trauma, but it took her a long time to admit it. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, more than 48,000 female veterans screened positive for military sexual trauma just in 2008.

May 13, 2010

text size **A** **A** **A**

Rachel Caesar first tried to join the Army after she saw a recruitment insert in *Jet* magazine. She filled it out and sent it in. She was 8 years old.

It wasn't long before her mom's phone started ringing. Caesar's mom told the Army recruiter: "Maybe you'll see her in 10 years," according to Caesar today.

Sure enough, after Caesar graduated high school, she joined the Massachusetts Army National Guard. But her experience didn't live up to the dream she'd had of the Army as a kid.

## 'I Was Sexually Harassed'

In 1996, while on active duty in Korea, Caesar became pregnant. She says that after that, a noncommissioned officer sexually harassed her.

"He told me plain out that I should have been carrying his children, so I should have been having a sexual relationship with him, and I would have gotten promoted," she says.

Years later, during a deployment to Afghanistan in 2003, Caesar says she was harassed again. She says she tried to get help from a chaplain, but that went nowhere. Eventually, her health declined — a bad knee, migraines. She didn't want to complain — didn't want to think of herself as a victim.

"Even though I was sexually harassed, I didn't think about it because I wasn't raped," she says. "I was never raped. But I was sexually harassed on many occasions."

So in 2004, Caesar gave up the only job she ever wanted to do. She left the military. At first, she and her two boys lived with her mother — barely functioning, she says.

"I would take the kids down to the bus stop, put them on the bus, get back in the house, lock myself in the house, sleep all day 'cause I was up all night, 'cause I couldn't sleep at night because of the nightmares and everything," she says.

“

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”

- Rachel Caesar

Things got worse. Rachel and her mother weren't getting along. Unable to hold a job, with no money, she and her two boys ended up in a state-run shelter.

That's when Caesar turned to the VA hospital in Boston.

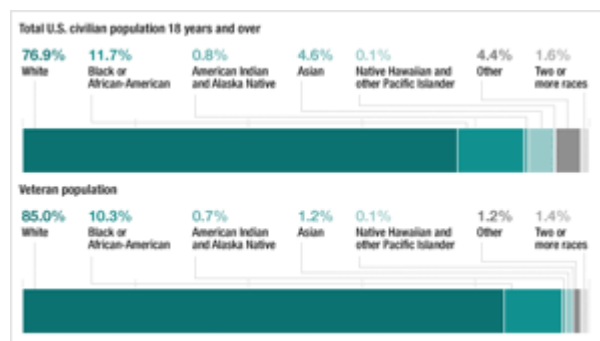
Lauren Devor, a clinical social worker and the coordinator of the women's veterans homeless program at the VA Boston health care system, was one of the people at the VA who helped Rachel.

The first thing she did was to find Caesar subsidized housing.

### Special Challenges For The VA

In the past five to six years, Devor says she's seen more and more female veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. The women are young, and many have kids.

#### War Veterans In The U.S.



> [Graphic: A Snapshot Of The New Veteran](#)

"Now I'm seeing many more women that have actually left their children to go to war and then come back," Devor says. "So you can well imagine a whole new area of work can be done around children feeling abandoned, other people taking on the parent role, then the mother coming back and trying to parent her children."

Children present special challenges for a VA hospital — everything from making sure there are changing tables for babies in the bathrooms to providing shelters for homeless female veterans and their children.

It's hard enough for any soldier to ask for help, but without these services, female veterans like Caesar find it even harder.

"Similar to male veterans, women who have served in the military are quite strong," says Eve Davison, a clinical psychologist at the VA hospital in Boston. She's another person Caesar turned to. "They see themselves as soldiers, and it can be really, really hard to admit that you need support."

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#### Military Sexual Trauma

Davison, who also works with the [National Center for PTSD](#), says she sees women like Caesar all the time. She says it's not uncommon for patients with post-traumatic stress disorder to have screened positive for something called military sexual trauma. It's a catch-all term, covering everything from sexual assault to sexual harassment.

According to the VA, more than 48,000 female veterans screened positive for military sexual trauma in 2008.

"I think the general public is unaware of these numbers," says Erin Mulhall, a director of research for the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, an advocacy group. She adds that the number is probably even higher because

many women are afraid to report cases of harassment or assault. At the VA, the burden is not on the veteran to document what happened to them.

"It provides free care to any veteran that walks into VA medical centers that screens positive for military sexual trauma," Mulhall says. "It's bolstered training for its mental health professionals on [military sexual trauma] and also provides disability compensation for those that have developed some major health problems due to their trauma."

Many women vets don't want to talk about sexual trauma. They don't want to admit it. They don't want to report it.

That's what happened to Caesar, who is only now beginning to let people know about what happened to her: "I was coming here for therapy, doing what I had to do, but I was dying inside and nobody here knew," Caesar says.

## comments

Discussions for this story are now closed. Please see the [Community FAQ](#) for more information.

Recent First



**Isaac Navarro (03Ghost)** wrote:

I would just like to clarify, before any misunderstanding occurs. When i wrote "Open your mouth", that was not a sexual reference. It was something to say "tell someone" or better yet, "verbally put that man in his place". I would also like to add that the very fact i have to write this is rather revealing to how touchy and and feeble we are becoming.

Thursday, May 20, 2010 1:09:46 PM

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**Isaac Navarro (03Ghost)** wrote:

omg, another bleeding heart definition of weakness. it's stupid things like this that are developing our children into these weak insignificant things. You get harassed by a man, then act like one too. Open your mouth! Obviously he was comfortable enough with her to kno he could get away with an incident like that. i believe the system my elders (that weren't weak national guardsmen) had in place was to "ACT LIKE an AMERICAN"! Crying used to belong to the French. When did this become available on eBay for people in Our America to take a shot of pathetic.

Thursday, May 20, 2010 1:01:38 PM

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**Annie Medeiros (AnnieMHC)** wrote:

If you are interested in this topic you should come to our innovative conference for health care professionals who work with veterans and others who have experienced trauma.

Discover literature's ability to provide new insights into trauma's effects on your patients—and to sustain you as you care for them.

After Shock: Humanities Perspectives on Trauma

<http://mainehumanities.org/programs/litandmed/aftershock-2010.html>

Monday, May 17, 2010 4:33:36 PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#) ↑[Report abuse](#)**S U. (sundog)** wrote:

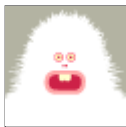
unlike filing for social security benefits, Veterans are not allowed to hire a lawyer to help them win their benefits. Ironic isn't it?

Saturday, May 15, 2010 11:12:28 AM

[Recommend \(1\)](#) ↑[Report abuse](#)**S U. (sundog)** wrote:

Something that needs to be addressed in this discussion. Why some Vets stories about VA care are great, and then others are not. 1. Depends on who helps you file your paperwork. 2. Depends on who you get for a doctor or counselor. 3. Depends on the Veteran's ability or their agent's [NOK] ability to negotiate with VA staff, to ensure the vet receives services that are helpful, and also depends on the veteran's ability to file paperwork in a timely fashion with all the i's dotted and t's crossed. Now imagine having to accomplish all of that, and just get lucky, after suffering a traumatic incident, a traumatic brain injury, losing a limb, being exposed to toxic chemicals or being in the grips of an addiction. The Bureacracy is an obstacle unto itself. And the expectation of Veterans who are in bad shape, to be able to navigate that during crisis is disasterous for the Veteran and their families on many levels. And with PTSD, just dealing with the Va can be a trigger because it is modeled after the military. That is in addition to facing clerks who have their own prejudices, assumptions, hang ups or personality quarks that may negatively affect your case.

Saturday, May 15, 2010 11:10:41 AM

[Recommend \(2\)](#) ↑[Report abuse](#)**S U. (sundog)** wrote:

Civilians are so far removed from military life at all, that its difficult for them to imagine how different being in the service is. Sometimes just the thought of explaining it makes me feel tired. Because there are so many details, so many departures, so many assumptions, and with each era--the military changes in some drastic fashion--So that the stories of vets from Korea or Vietnam are different from those in the first Iraq wars, or the Second, or Afghanistan. Not everyone sees combat, not everyone is combat trained, or goes overseas, or is deployed on a plane or boat etc., there are so many variables. And by the time you get done trying to tell your civilian counterparts what it was like during your time, they have lost interest and gone back to watching the tee-vee. I don't know why I even bother. And my experiences with other vets, hasn't been no picnic either.

Saturday, May 15, 2010 9:59:13 AM

[Recommend \(1\)](#) ↑[Report abuse](#)**amy dill (navygirl2)** wrote:

I share your pain, Ladies. When women hurt, women help: Check out online support that is anonymous and free...Built by women veterans, For women veterans: [www.graceafterfire.org](http://www.graceafterfire.org)

Saturday, May 15, 2010 9:42:52 AM

[Recommend \(1\)](#) ↑[Report abuse](#)**S U. (sundog)** wrote:

Koz--It makes no difference if you are married in the service. It makes no difference if you are engaged. You can be in a committed relationship with a ring, but that doesn't mean you will be even stationed on the same continent as your spouse. To a person who has no scruples about harassing or assaulting women, your man? Out of sight, out of mind. In fact some think that means your ring will indicate you just don't want a commitment, and only a one night stand. sad really. I cannot be clear enough. These people who committ these crimes, are not normal people. These harassers and rapists are the ones with a pre-existing condition, and expecting that there is some magic precaution any woman can take, to deter them from committing these acts {other than arming herself 24 hours a day} is ridiculously unrealistic. These nuts belong in jail, or in therapy, but they do not belong in the military. If not military women, they would be assault and harassing civilian dependents, or local nationals or any other female that looked accessible and isolated. And the VA and the Military does retraumatize the men and women who come forward to report these events. And if you see that first hand, it will make you think twice about reporting yours.

Saturday, May 15, 2010 8:47:38 AM

[Recommend \(2\)](#) ↑

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**Service Women (Servicewomen)** wrote:

The Service Women's Action Network is addressing this issue on the ground and in Congress. Please take a minute to fill out our MST survey, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/N3KSJBM> or find out more about the organization, [www.servicewomen.org](http://www.servicewomen.org) .

Friday, May 14, 2010 5:21:14 PM

[Recommend \(3\)](#) ↑

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**Cathy A (ArmyVeteran)** wrote:

I was assaulted in the Army and the way they handled my case was far more traumatizing than the rape itself. The military has a lot to learn on how it treats survivors. I went to the VA and they were even worse, just a bunch of recent college graduates that never served. If you been assaulted I recommend that you go to an outside advocacy group such as the Military Rape Crisis Center [www.stopmilitaryrape.org](http://www.stopmilitaryrape.org).

Friday, May 14, 2010 3:52:30 PM

[Recommend \(8\)](#) ↑

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