

Making Adjustments Episode 1: Military Sexual Assault

Hello and welcome to the first episode of our new long-form podcast, Making Adjustments. My name is Alyssa and I serve as the Victim Awareness Campaign Specialist at SACIS. For those of you who aren't familiar, SACIS stands for Sexual Assault Counseling and Information Service, and we are a non-profit that supports people in our community in Central Illinois who have experienced or been impacted by sexual violence through resources like counseling, legal and medical advocacy, and community education - you will probably be hearing a lot from me and some from other members of the SACIS team on this podcast.

So if you are wondering about our new podcast name, Making Adjustments, here is what's going on with that. We are an organization that fights for justice for victimized oppressed people and we believe that true justice isn't only an idea or concept: it's a behavior. Changing behavior can take awhile, but small steps over time will lead to giant justice. So we want to do the work and create space to talk about issues surrounding sexual violence and effecting survivors in their everyday lives. We will be releasing at least one episode a month, but it's possible that we may throw in a surprise episode or 2 if we feel like there is something that needs to be talked about, so make sure to tune in for a thoughtful dive into an element of culture or policy that could benefit from a few healthy adjustments.

Over the course of the past year, a lot of people have come forward and shared their experiences of sexual assault, harassment, and misconduct within the military. I wanna first start by commending the individuals who have bravely shared their stories and those who have continued to fight for change as advocates and activists. And I want to remind those who haven't publicly disclosed that their experiences still matter, they still have a voice and a life and inherent worth, and they still deserve justice. Steps to healing look different for everyone, and it may not be in the best interests of a survivor to share what happened to them.

What I can say for sure though, is that this has been an ongoing and pervasive issue long before the past year. A huge part of the problem is the fact that it has been left unaddressed for decades, and unfortunately, like the whole of sexual assault in society, is completely wrapped in a culture of silence. It's pushed under the rug, ignored, not taken seriously, and people aren't held accountable. This creates an environment that normalizes abuse and assault, and it's unsafe for everyone. Sexual assault isn't just happening to young heterosexual women- it can and does happen to everyone because sexual assault is a way for someone to assert power or dominance over another individual through violence.

Before we dive too far in, let's pause for a minute and take a look at just how prevalent and pervasive of an issue this is. It's really no surprise that in an environment where sexual misconduct isn't taken seriously, over 76% of survivors of military sexual assault never formally report the crime. This number also may have something to do with the fact that 64% of women who do report face harsh retaliation within their positions, with a third of victims being discharged within 7 months after filing a formal report. In 2018, 20,500 service members reported sexual assault or rape, but the number who visited a VA clinic for care related to military sexual trauma was 1.3 million. That same year, out of those 20,500 cases, only around 670 were brought to court martial- which is the judicial court for trying members of the armed services accused of offenses against military law. And of those 670 cases, only 203 resulted in a conviction. That is just under a 0.1% rate of justice for survivors.

And speaking of court-martial, it's important to recognize that these are cases being tried for offenses under *military law* specifically. Within military law, the definitions of sexual assault and rape, are much narrower than our state and federal laws. The Department of Defense defines sexual assault as intentional sexual contact characterized by the use of force, threats, intimidation, abuse of authority, or when the victim does not or cannot consent. Sexual assault can occur without regard to gender, spousal relationship, or age of the victim. But the main difference, is that sexual assault must involve physical contact. Sexual harassment is concluded to be more of a factor that could eventually lead to sexual assault, but isn't its own issue that needs to be addressed. Of course, this isn't true. Sexual harassment has a huge mental, emotional, and physical impact on people and it should be taken just as seriously as any other sexual violence.

There is a huge push right now for reform in how military sexual assault cases are handled, and rightfully so, but before we explore those, I think it would be helpful to talk about the current system that fails to bring justice to so many people or prevent rape from happening in the first place. Currently, cases are kept within the chain of military command, meaning that if someone experiences sexual assault, they would report to their commander or supervisor- basically, someone of a higher ranking position than them. And in theory, it may seem like a sound idea to have the people in charge oversee keeping those they supervise safe, but the reality is that the majority of women reported that their assault was perpetrated by someone of a higher rank than them. Obviously, not much is going to be done in the way of justice if the person you are reporting to is also the perpetrator of assault or a close comrade of the perpetrator. Better systems of accountability need to be put into place to allow for survivors to come forward and feel that they have a chance to receive fair treatment and have access to the

resources they may need to heal, such as medical or mental health care- without being penalized for something that is not their fault.

Very recently, and for the first time ever, the United States Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin acknowledged this issue, and voiced support for those advocates who are fighting to remove sexual assault prosecutions from military justice systems. Currently, lawmakers are considering The Vanessa Guillen Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act, which would remove control of sexual assault cases from commanders. The legislation is in response to the tragic murder of Guillen at Fort Hood in April of 2020 after she was sexually harassed by her supervisor, a violation that her commander knew about, yet did nothing to stop or address. Under current law, commanders who don't have any legal training make the decision on whether to prosecute a service member for major crimes like rape and murder under the military justice system, but this act would transfer the responsibility to military attorneys with significant trial experience outside of the chain of command.

Another aspect of this issue that is often overlooked is the combined impact of different forms of trauma that may be experienced within the military. So the official term: military sexual trauma, refers to any form of sexual assault or harassment that a member experienced during military service. So this could really include anything, from unwanted comments about one's body, to unwanted or sexual advances that one found threatening, being touched or grabbed in a way that made a person uncomfortable, even during "hazing" experiences, and of course being pressured, coerced or threatened into performing any sexual act, anything that occurred while one or both parties were intoxicated or unconscious, or really any sexual activity where there was not consent.

So obviously, these things negatively affect a person's health- even many many years later. The Department of Veterans Affairs lists disturbing memories or nightmares, difficulty feeling safe, depression, numbness, drug and alcohol abuse, isolation, anger or other emotional issues, problems sleeping or continued physical health problems all as effects they have seen when treating survivors. And additionally, it's important to recognize that sexual violence can cause PTSD and witnessing or experiencing other forms of violence within a military setting can also lead to PTSD. So service members who are survivors, may have to deal with the compounded trauma of those experiences, and it's necessary to take that into consideration when connecting them with resources for healing such as counseling, advocacy, case management, and more.

It's clear from what we have explored today and the scope of the issue that adjustments need to be made for addressing military sexual violence, because the current system of prevention (if there even is one) isn't preventing rape and the current system of justice, isn't delivering justice.

Before we go today, we do just want to take a moment and recognize those service members who have been impacted by sexual violence inside the military and out. There are places to go and people to turn to who will support you and believe you, our agency being one of them. If you are local to our service area, our 24 hour crisis hotline is always available at (888) 345-2846. Another great resource is the national Sexual assault hotline, which can be reached at 1-800-656-4673. Both of these resources are completely free and completely confidential. Your information won't be shared with anyone else and you have control over how much of your story and experiences you want to share.

Thank you all so much for joining us today. Feel free to reach out or email us with any questions or comments- you can find our contact information on our website, www.sacis.org. Resources and other things mentioned in this podcast will be linked in the episode description, and we hope to see you back here next time, on Making Adjustments.

Mentioned in this episode:

<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mentalhealth/msthome/index.asp>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/06/22/military-sex-assault-lloyd-austin/>

<https://www.hillandponton.com/facts-on-military-sexual-trauma-and-statistics/>