

The invisible war. Understanding the human side of rape within the military

By Dr Nina Burrowes

On March 11th I'll be speaking at the UK launch of [The Invisible War](#), a ground breaking documentary that exposes the extent and nature of rape and sexual assault in the American military. The figures are shocking. In 2011, 3192 sexual assaults were reported. Taking into account the likely number of unreported assaults it is estimated that 500,000 women have been sexually assaulted in the US military. The launch of this documentary in the UK inevitably raises questions about rape and sexual assault within our own armed forces.

When it comes to the British military I'm an outsider looking in. I have no experience of working with or for the armed services. I have never conducted any research on rape within the British military. I've never even read any research on rape within the British military; although, not through lack of trying. Just before writing this post I searched online to see if any new research had been published. The only research I found was my own. In the [two reviews I have conducted on rape and sexual assault](#) I note that whilst there is a significant body of research on rape in the American military I have not been able to find any publically available, independent, peer-reviewed research on rape in the British military.

I imagine that the film will make lots of people call for change. I'd like things to change too. I'd like it if the men and women who serve in our armed forces could do so without being raped. I'd like victims of rape within our military to feel confident enough to report the offence; and believed, supported and protected when they do. I'd like rapists within our military to be caught, prosecuted, convicted, punished and helped so that they don't offend again. This isn't just a change I'd like to see in our military, it's a change I'd like to see in our society too.

The role I choose for myself in all of this is to try and help people have a more sophisticated understanding of the realities of rape and sexual abuse. Not the numbers, not the statistics – the human bit. *Why are we all so reluctant to talk about rape? How does someone rebuild their life after being raped? Why would someone commit a sex offence?* I'm not saying I have all of the answers to these questions. Rape and sexual abuse is a topic I am constantly learning about. I'll never fully understand it. But I'm willing to share what I do know in the hope that a better understanding of the realities of sexual abuse helps to create the change that is needed.

Last year I published [a report](#) that was designed to help prosecutors understand the psychology of rape. The report is now used by prosecutors, police forces, and other organisations that have an interest in rape and sexual abuse. Largely based on the content of that report, I want to share some of my opinions about rape in the military context in the hope that it helps the people who have the power to make a difference see why meaningful change is needed.

Why might life in the military be difficult for victims of rape?

Anyone who's been raped faces a long journey to rebuild their lives; victims of rape within the military are likely to face additional challenges on their journey. Few of us expect to be raped. Most of us go through life assuming that rape is something that happens to 'other people'. Thinking this makes us feel safe and helps us get on with our daily lives. But the truth is people like you *do* get raped.

If we do think about the prospect of rape we're likely to think that we would successfully fight off any attacker. This is a clever way of making ourselves feel safe, but many people who are raped freeze rather than fight. After the offence they struggle to understand their behaviour. *Why didn't I fight? Why didn't I shout?* For anyone who is trained in combat this struggle is likely to be greater, especially for men who are raped.

It's not only your own behaviour that doesn't make sense after rape. Rape turns your whole world upside down and leaves you feeling very unsafe. Military personnel already operate in dangerous situations. How can someone feel protected from any external threat if they don't feel safe within their own unit? Military personnel are most at risk of rape in combat situations. Victims of rape in this context face a situation few of us could tolerate: nowhere feels safe, nowhere *is* safe. And they may face this situation without the benefit of any external support network, the option of avoiding their attacker, or the option of leaving.

One of the ways of adapting to the chaos and fear after a rape is to blame yourself. Saying 'it was my fault' is a way of taking control of the situation. It helps you explain what happened. It helps you believe it won't happen again. It stops the chaos. But the price you pay is living with guilt and shame.

Blaming yourself doesn't just help you adapt to chaos. Most people are raped by someone they know. Often the very person they thought was there to protect them. If the abuse is reported and the victim is not believed the sense of betrayal extends to the wider community. Not being believed when you report the abuse can be as bad as the abuse itself. It can place you in a situation where you face leaving the people you want to stay close to. This may be especially hard for victims of rape within the military. Being in the military isn't just a job. Victims who are unheard or unsupported face leaving their career, their home, and their friends. Blaming yourself offers you a way out of this. By taking responsibility for the rape you create a situation where you can stay attached to the people who betrayed you. It's a psychological balancing act that allows you to stay where you are when the thought of leaving is too uncomfortable.

All of this means that theoretically the victim of rape within the military pays an especially high price. They are made to feel unsafe in a situation that was already dangerous; they may be highly motivated to dismiss the abuse or blame themselves; or they may face the prospect of leaving their careers as a consequence of the rape.

Why might life in the military be easy for rapists?

Why do people rape? We very rarely have a sophisticated dialogue about sex offenders in society. This silence helps offenders – so let me try and break that silence.

Some people use rape as a coping mechanism. For these offenders rape is a way of taking control when they feel out of control. It's a way of re-establishing their identity as 'strong and powerful' when they feel disempowered. Some rapist may have wanted to use consensual sex as a way of coping; but felt unable to get consensual sex and committed a rape. This type of offence may be more likely to happen in a situation where there are many men and few women. For other offenders the non-consensual nature of the sex may form a specific part of their coping mechanism. These offenders do not want their victim to consent to the sex because they need to feel powerful.

This type of offending is often triggered by an event that makes the offender feel out of control or disempowered. Triggers within the military context could include disciplinary action; the fear associated with combat; or personal problems back at home that they feel unable to deal with. This type of offending may explain why the prevalence of rape may increase in combat situations. On deployment an offender is likely to face more triggers for their offending at a time when they are removed from their traditional support network and alternative coping mechanisms.

If you haven't thought about sex offenders before you might assume that a sex offender is fully aware that they are a sex offender. This isn't the case. We all like to think of ourselves in a positive light. Rapists are no different from us in this respect. To admit to yourself that you have committed a sex offence can be a very difficult thing to do because it threatens your self-concept. Many rapists do not admit to themselves that they are raping. Often their offence features sufficient levels of denial for them to kid themselves that they are having consensual sex. Our portrayals of sex offenders as monsters who prey on strangers in dark alleyways help offenders with this denial. They do not recognise themselves in the monster image - who would?



This type of denial is facilitated by other peoples' responses to the rape. When a rape is not reported the sex offender is reassured that their behaviour was acceptable. When a rape is reported but no action is taken it reinforces this message even further. For those who are successfully prosecuted, receiving a minor punishment sends a message that 'what you did was not that bad'. If this is all happening in a context where poor attitudes towards women are routinely tolerated then sex offenders are likely to continue offending in the belief that their behaviour is both normal and acceptable.

In [my report](#) I also list some of the contextual factors that may help a rapist avoid punishment for their offence. It makes for hard reading if you think about rape within the military. The report I wrote was specifically written for civilian prosecutors; consequently the military context was not part of my thinking at the time. And again, I'd like to emphasise that I've not had the opportunity to read any research or see any data on rape within the British military. However, using the report as a basis it's my opinion that the military context has the potential to provide a rapist with everything they need to get away with their offence. They have access to a victim who already

trusts them, they are likely to have access to a safe location to commit the offence, and their victim is unlikely to report the offence. If reports of rape are not taken seriously; if most rapes are unsuccessfully prosecuted; and if the punishment for rape is minimal then all of this helps to improve the conditions for any rapist.

Why don't we want to talk about rape?

As a society we don't like to talk about rape. When we do we tend to litter our conversations with stereotypes that serve to make us feel safe. I think it's important to have some compassion for ourselves when we do this. Rape is scary. It's difficult to think about. Painting rapists as monsters who are easy to avoid is a clever way of making ourselves feel safe. Blaming victims for their foolish behaviour is a clever way of reassuring ourselves that we won't become victims of rape because we would never be that foolish. Normalising or minimising the behaviours around rape as 'men being men' is a way of reassuring ourselves that our own behaviour is acceptable. Denying the possibility that such a thing could happen in our families, our workplaces, amongst our friends, is a clever way of reassuring ourselves that none of the people we like, love, or respect could be rapists. But whilst we should have compassion for our desire to feel safe we should know that when we do these things we make life harder for victims and easier for sex offenders.

If we truly want to reduce the amount of sexual abuse in our society one of the best things we can do is to have a more sophisticated dialogue about it. This dialogue won't necessarily make us *feel* safer. But by knowing more about the realities of sexual abuse we will ensure we are aware of the real risks; we'll provide a much more supportive environment for victims of sexual abuse; and we'll make it much harder for sex offenders to continue offending.

My hope for the British military is that they have the courage to open their eyes to the reality of what's happening. I hope that they are able to see that meaningful change will require much more than just policies. This is a crime about people. It needs a solution that is about people too.

To read my previous research on sexual abuse [click here](#).

If you'd like to know more about recovery from abuse please [click here](#).

