

'No one would ever speak up again': UK Servicewomen feel military culture stops them from reporting sexual assault

November 28 2023, by Harriet Gray and Nicola Lester



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An [inquiry](#) into the death of a 19-year-old soldier in the British army found that relentless sexual harassment by her line manager was "almost

certain" to have been a causal factor in her death.

Royal Artillery Gunner Jaysley-Louise Beck took her own life after receiving more than 4,500 messages and voicemails from her boss over two months. Beck felt [unable to report the harassment](#), as a previous alleged sexual assault she experienced by a different senior colleague had not been handled effectively. She did not want to be labeled a "serial troublemaker".

Our [new peer-reviewed study](#) co-authored with Emma Norton, a founder of the Centre for Military Justice, suggests that Beck's fears of reprisal were well founded.

We conducted in-depth interviews with six female veterans in the UK who experienced sexual violence perpetrated by a serviceman while in the [armed forces](#). They told us that how their peers and the chain of command responded caused further harm beyond the assault itself. This created an environment where they were afraid to speak out.

As one participant said, "After seeing what happened to me for saying something, no one would ever speak up again."

The vast extent of sexual harassment and assault in the British armed forces is well documented in official reports, including the [Atherton report](#) and the [Army sexual harassment survey](#). A [report](#) commissioned by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and published in 2021 described [sexual harassment](#) as "part of the landscape" for women working in defense. As one of our interviewees put it, if personnel acknowledged every incident of harassment, "people would be [discussing it] 24/7".

Echoing the findings of the Atherton report, we found that women who report sexual violence in the military are not always believed. Instead, they may be belittled, blamed, shamed and bullied.

Several of those we interviewed said that responses from their commanding officers focused on their clothing or the amount of alcohol they had consumed, rather than on the assault itself. Others reported being ostracized and bullied by colleagues, including other women, after their disclosures.

One participant recalled: "When you hear your own officer commanding saying, 'you drink too much ... you wear short skirts so you deserve it' ... [it] sends your mind all over the place."

"Sexual offenses and unacceptable sexual behavior have no place in the armed forces and we are committed to stamping them out," an MoD spokesperson told [the Guardian](#). "All allegations are taken extremely seriously and crimes are investigated by the service police."

How the military handles sexual misconduct and assault

Generally speaking, alleged crimes involving service personnel go through the service (not civilian) justice system, investigated by military police. If the evidence supports it, cases are referred to the service prosecuting authority, the military's equivalent of the crown prosecution service. They decide whether to bring charges against the accused in a court martial.

Conviction rates for completed rape trials in the service justice system are [significantly lower](#) than completed rape trials in the crown court.

Some offenses, such as murder and manslaughter, are generally considered unsuitable to be tried in the military system due to their severity. But efforts to have serious sexual offenses added to that category have so far been [resisted](#) by the MoD.

For offenses that don't reach the level of criminal conviction, the military also has a system of administrative or disciplinary sanctions to punish misconduct or breaches of military [personnel rules](#). These can range from a verbal telling off and extra duties, to dismissal from the military.

Alarmingly, the sanctions used to hold perpetrators of sexual violence to account appear to be used against victims as well. Our participants described facing punishment or formal warnings for breaches of the military's rules that came to light when they reported their sexual victimization.

For example, if they had consumed alcohol when they were not meant to, been in an out-of-bounds location, or fraternized with lower ranks. As one participant described: "I knew that if I reported it that we'd all get into trouble for staying out ... We'd get done for drinking."

Changing procedures and changing culture

In response to [significant criticisms](#) of its management of [sexual misconduct](#) and sexual offenses in recent years, the military has made some welcome changes.

Most notably, in 2022 it introduced a new [zero-tolerance policy](#). This means that personnel who have been criminally convicted of a sexual offense should automatically be discharged.

"We have set up an independent defense serious crime unit, created a victim witness care unit and strengthened our ability to discharge from service anyone who has committed an offense or engages in unacceptable sexual behavior," the MoD spokesperson said.

While we welcome these reforms, our research suggests that they are far

from sufficient. Given how the culture in the British military treats victims of sexual violence and [women generally](#), broader cultural changes are needed, as well as far more support for victims.

For civilian victims of [sexual violence](#), the decision to report and seek justice is complex and traumatic. Our findings, and the tragic death of Jaysley-Louise Beck, show that servicewomen face additional barriers due to the standards, procedures and culture within the military. As long as this remains unaddressed, servicewomen's careers, well-being and even their lives remain at risk.

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