

## The Sexual Abuse of Women in the Military Is the LaVena Johnson Case Rare?

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How many women would be willing to work for a company where one in three women reported sexual abuse? How many women would be willing to work for a company where less than half of these sexual abuse reports even received any attention? Or where only one third of the sexual abuse allegations that do receive attention, result in a prosecution? Would you want your wife, girlfriend or daughter to work for a company with a rampant reputation for sexual abuse and misogyny? Yet, women who just want to defend their country find themselves also defending themselves from their fellow soldiers. The chain of command that they report sexual abuse and harassment to is often just as complicit in their abuse by ignoring or trivializing their complaints or using threats and intimidation to silence women alleging sexual abuse.

Private First Class LaVena Johnson had been an honor student with a lifelong aspiration of attending college. However, when approached by military recruiters, LaVena's patriotism won out and she decided to enlist in the military instead. Her father, a physician who had worked in the military as a civilian, was not happy with her decision, but helped her break the news to her mother and both reluctantly agreed to support LaVena Johnson in her new military goal.

LaVena Johnson was told that, because she was a woman, it was highly unlikely that she'd be sent to Iraq. Though she wanted to serve her country, LaVena's parents maintain that she was terrified of being deployed to Iraq. An Army recruiter even took the time to come to her home and assure her parents that the chances were very slim that she'd be sent there. Not long after basic military training, however, LaVena Johnson found herself in Iraq anyway.

On July 17, 2005, LaVena Johnson spoke to her mother by phone and was excited at the fact that she believed she'd be home by Christmas of that same year. In an interview with Democracy Now's Amy Goodman, LaVena Johnson's mother stated that this was LaVena's favorite time of the year and that she was delighted to be coming home from the military sooner than she'd expected. Less than 48 hours later, however, the Johnson's received a knock at their door at 7:30 in the morning. LaVena Johnson was dead. Photographed evidence would later show that her body was badly bruised, gloves were glued to her hands, acid was poured on her genitals (Mr. Johnson maintains this was possibly to destroy DNA evidence), her front teeth were loosened, her nose was broken and a single gunshot wound pierced her head. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson state they were told by the military that LaVena Johnson committed suicide and, despite what they believe to be overwhelming evidence of sexual abuse and even witness reports they've received stating that she was in great spirits before her death, the United States Military has told the Johnson family that there will not be a further investigation into the death of 19 year old LaVena Johnson.

The LaVena Johnson case, however shocking it may be, is not as rare as it may seem. Sexual abuse is a longstanding allegation within the military ranks of recent generations. This is the first time in U.S. military history that women are participating in combat situations more than ever before. As early as 1995, the San Francisco Chronicle reported that "Ninety percent of women under 50 who have served in the US military and who responded to a survey report being victims of sexual harassment, and nearly one-third of the respondents of all ages say they have been raped."

A March 2007 Pentagon report indicated that less than half of the sexual abuse investigations resulted in any action being taken and, of the ones where action was taken, only one third resulted in a court martial.

Women, such as Lieutenant Jennifer Dyer, who maintains a fellow-officer raped her, even report that they are treated as criminals; intimidated and threatened when they do come forward. In an interview with ABC's 60 Minutes, Dyer says she was threatened with arrest after she refused to return to Camp Shelby, Mississippi where the Lieutenant she accused of raping her was still working. "They stated that two weeks was enough time to recover from such an incident," Lieutenant Dyer told 60 Minutes. "I was told that if I didn't return on time, they would send MPs to my door and have me arrested."

With official Pentagon statistics being what they are and considering that rape is the most underreported of crimes, meaning that incidences can be much higher than reported, the looming question appears to be that while these women are protecting our country, who is protecting them?