

## For Some Who Served, an Awful Betrayal of Trust

The documentary filmmaker Kirby Dick has become one of the indispensable muckrakers of American cinema, zeroing in on frequently painful stories about how power functions in the absence or failure of accountability. “Twist of Faith” (2004) was about a young man seeking some measure of justice after being sexually abused, as a child, by a priest. “This Film Is Not Yet Rated” (2006) focused on the secretive, often inexplicable workings of the Motion Picture Association of America’s ratings board. “Outrage” (2009) pointed a finger at the sexual hypocrisy of the political class.

The issues explored in those films are of the sort that hover around the edges of public awareness without always commanding the full measure of attention they deserve. Mr. Dick, a careful interviewer and a brilliant generator of indignation, does his best to make them unavoidable. His new film, “The Invisible War,” made in collaboration with Amy Ziering, addresses the shockingly common, profoundly distressing problem of sexual assault in the United States military. The problem is not exactly a secret. Every now and then a scandal erupts that generates headlines, hearings and pious declarations that such conduct is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. You may remember the outcry over what happened at the Tailhook Association meetings in 1991, at Aberdeen Proving Ground in 1996 and at the Air Force Academy in 2003. But as Mr. Dick and Ms. Ziering show, these high-profile incidents are far from exceptional, and the fallout from them has changed very little.

The Defense Department estimates that 22,800 violent sex crimes were committed in the military last year alone, and the filmmakers calculate that 1 in 5 women in military service has been the victim of sexual assault. “The Invisible War” presents other numbers, mostly from the military’s own records, that make the picture of pervasive abuse even more alarming. Many crimes are never reported — this is true of rape in civilian life as well as in the military — but among those that are, only a tiny fraction are dealt with in any meaningful way. A culture of impunity has flourished, and the film suggests that the military has mostly responded with pathetic attempts at prevention (through posters and public service announcements) and bureaucratic rituals of self-protection.

Mr. Dick and Ms. Ziering interview retired and active service members — like Capt. Greg Rinckey, who was a lawyer for the Judge Advocate General’s Corps, and Capt. Anu Bhagwati, a former Marine and the executive director of the Service Women’s Action Network — who have spent years trying to change the way the military deals with sexual assault. (The Pentagon has recently developed new rules about the reporting of sex crimes, which seem intended to address some of the concerns raised by this film). Scholars and legal experts are also heard from, as are Defense Department officials and members of Congress from both parties, but the heart of the film resides in the testimony of a handful of survivors, most but not all of them women.

Their stories are difficult to hear, though the candor and bravery displayed in the telling is admirable. Trina McDonald speaks of being drugged and raped while she was stationed at a Naval operating station in Alaska. Elle Helmer, assigned to a prestigious posting in Washington, was assaulted after enduring months of harassment by her fellow Marines. Kori Cioca's jaw was broken when, she says, she was raped by a Coast Guard commanding officer. To say that none of them, or the others interviewed, are satisfied by the military's response would be a gross understatement. In some cases charges were hastily dropped, never filed or allowed to drift into administrative limbo. A few assailants were charged with adultery, and sometimes, astonishingly, the victims were too.

Several of the survivors interviewed in the film have husbands or fathers who are also soldiers, sailors and Marines. Military service is often a family tradition, and the military itself, with its customs of loyalty, solidarity and shared sacrifice, can be a kind of family for its members. This means that the violations chronicled in "The Invisible War" are compounded by a deep and terrible betrayal, which ripples outward from the various branches of the service into the society as a whole. This is not a movie that can be ignored.