

### **The Reality of Retaliation for Reporting Violence**

The reality of retaliation for reporting of sexual abuse, sexual assault, or sexual harassment is critical in understanding the entire disclosure/reporting process of the victim of abuse. While generally retaliation is viewed as a post-offense behavior, it really exists pre-offense – as a dynamic of the offender that precedes the assaults or harassment and prepares the victim and the environment to tolerate and facilitate the offender's successful abuse of the victim.

*"I was talking with Scott, see, and I was telling him how Julie don't seem to love me any more, like, I wasn't getting the attention, I was missing her attention . . ."*  
- offender before he assaulted his 4 year old daughter

Offenders begin their offending long before the actual assault occurs. Along with indoctrinating a victim to blame him or herself for the assault, offenders prepare the audience to disregard or mistreat the victim, to overvalue the offender, and to deny that the abuse could have even happened.

*"I told the cops, in fact, I even called the cops on myself. I told them about what a problem she was, how she wanted her dad back. I called the cops on myself about 50 times. When she finally told, it was after I raped her and grounded her, the cop came out, patted me on the back, and said, 'You won't believe what she accused you of – molesting her! Boy, I see what you put up with here.'" - abuser of stepdaughter*

In the military environment, this is especially critical to understand. Similar to a familial situation of abuse, the offender has access to those in the environment of the victim – his or her commander, friends, support system, and colleagues. Completely different from the experience of a victim assaulted by a stranger, a victim assaulted by a fellow service member not only deals with the reality of the rape, but with the publicity of it, the impact on her community and reputation, and the influence of the offender.

*"I sat there alone in the courthouse, listening to all those people lined up to say what a great guy he was. I overheard them calling me a slut, saying they couldn't believe I thought we were friends. It went on for days during the trial." - rape victim*

It is much easier for people to take sides when they "know" the offender. People rely on their own judgments about who is "like that" or "not like that," especially in intimate violence. They use their own experiences with the offender to judge the victim's allegations, deciding that if the offender is "not that type of guy" and if the victim is either lying or did something to "deserve" the abuse. The victim's behavior is judged in hindsight through the lens of disbelief or blame and her future behavior is analyzed for "proof" of her "motive to lie," vindictiveness, emotional problems, deceptiveness, or bad character. The audience is faced with believing that the person they like is a "bad" person capable of serious and frightening behavior or that the victim is a lying, seeking attention, or vindictive, much more acceptable ideas especially in a culture steeped in victim blaming, rapes myths, and sexism.

*"You know, I knew what happened there (at the unit's hospital). This girl that got raped, they all made fun of her. They mocked her, talked about her being a bitch and a liar. I swore I would never report if I got raped. I worked there, I would never go there putting out my business. Then I got raped, by a fellow medic, my co-worker, someone I worked with every day. He was a good medic, everyone liked him. There's no way I would report there. I didn't report there – I tried to get help outside. I had to work with him day after day, then I could never work there again."*

*- paraphrased rape victim interview of this examiner*

Victims are acutely aware of their environment before any assault occurs. Victims hear attitudes, beliefs, and blaming of victims. They see the perceived value of the offender, how popular he is, what a good duty performer he is, whose ear he has or how his reputation precedes him. The offenders "prep the battlefield" by complaining about the victim, painting the victim as "crazy" or sexually available, or by building sympathy or popularity. The guy who sexually harasses will bemoan how "sensitive" and "politically correct" things have gotten. The unit will joke about "all these sexual assault cases" or "how the command has to prosecute everything because of the media." Victims hear about the "injustice" of the system, how all a woman has to do is "cry rape" to get what she wants – transferred, money, out of her own collateral charges. The culture of retaliation against victims exists prior to any report only to become focused on a particular victim who makes an outcry.

*"He got letters of support, how people did not believe he did it. These people were my peers, I had to encounter them, they were all [position] too. I went to meetings, trainings – I didn't know if they had written letters for him. Hardly anyone reached out to me or asked me how I was. They said it was 'awkward.' I kind of understood how they couldn't believe he would assault me – what I couldn't understand is why they would believe I would lie."*

*- paraphrased victim interview by this examiner*

Women turn against other women fairly readily. The perception of power and acceptance still lies with men, an issue that is magnified in the male dominated military. Most women fear being labeled "one of those" even more than being assaulted, fearing men will tiptoe around her, label her, ostracize her, or fail to recognize her as a peer.

*When the victim ran to the LTC next door, barefoot, in the middle of the night to escape her battering, the LTC went next door to talk to the husband, who was also later convicted of raping her. He told the offender to keep it in the family, redirected the MP's from arresting the perp, and told him to deal with his wife because she was an issue and upset the children.*

Imagine this culture when you have been victimized, when the burden of silence, reporting, surviving, and the responsibility for the consequences lies with you – not only were you assaulted, but now, because you told, you are the one who caused the problem. If you had only dealt with it, or talked to him about it, or gave him another chance, or just stayed away from him, his career/family/life would not have been destroyed. And, if people can't believe he "would do something like that," then everyone feels vulnerable to attack or "false allegations," especially because the offender is usually ahead of the spin, portraying himself as misunderstood, mistreated, or a victim of the military's zealous attempt to "make sex illegal."

*The perp went to his command to report the Children and Family Services investigation and allegations, painting it as a fabricated allegation of his disturbed and vindictive wife before the command had heard of the report. His self-report was considered a sign of his earnestness. However, when he verbally abused the female officer who told him about the investigation and to stay away from his wife, intimidating her and making a racial innuendo, this was written off as a "natural reaction to false allegations." He was convicted of rape.*

Finally, in order to address any retaliation, we are asking a victim to once again report. Do the exact same thing that brought harm, sometimes even more harm than the assault itself. The primary mitigator of trauma from assault is social support and being believed. To be shamed or ostracized can have a devastating impact on the victim, as well as every other potential victim of assault. Each time retaliation occurs, the future victims get the message. To expect cohesion and "mission readiness" in a unit full of combatants and enemies within is simply ridiculous.

Retaliation is final culmination of offender's efforts to be successful and protected. The shaming, shunning, or patronizing protection of an individual, instead of the systemic stance of no-tolerance for maltreatment facilitates sexual assault, inhibits disclosure, and ensures the destructive process of retaliation, whoever is in charge of the reporting or investigation.

*What do we do?*

Retaliation is a complex issue. To impose a "black and white" response or dictum (i.e. take it away from the command) is to recreate the paradigm that drives retaliation – the dichotomous right or wrong, good or bad type of response that drives people to take sides. It is incomplete, perhaps giving an illusion of an effective response without addressing the issue.

Retaliation could be considered akin to bullying and there are many interventions that have been shown to combat and decrease bullying. Here are some of my suggestions –

1. **Create an environment that embraces a stance of no tolerance for maltreatment.**
2. **Educate and train about sexual assault, offenders, and what retaliation is** – I have had much success in attaining a perceptual shift in people when they are reminded of how offenders succeed and how complex sexual assault and investigation of the “truth” can be.
3. **Create an anonymous and confidential reporting agency or source that is outside of the command to investigate and intervene in reports of retaliation** – this allows the command to remain in command, but provides the opportunity for intervention and investigation of retaliation outside of the command if the command is ineffectively dealing with it or contributing to it, without “punishing” the commanders that are concerned and intervening. It also allows people outside the military to report concerns (like parents of victims).
4. **Require a dialogue with the victim before interventions are made in the victims behalf, even if the intention is to protect the victim** – some efforts are perceived as a part of the retaliation or as efforts that result in the victim’s loss of status, support, or competency (like a job move). A dialogue with the victim’s input would ensure the victim’s needs are being better met.
5. **Consequent those who retaliate and hold bystanders accountable for intervening.**
6. **Remind commanders it is not their job to believe or not believe – it is their job to intervene to provide the best response for both parties, to provide care and leadership. The job of finding guilt or innocence is the Courts.**

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