

Documentary: Widespread Sexual Abuse in the U.S. Military

The New York Times This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only.

June 21, 2012
Movie Review

For Some Who Served, an Awful Betrayal of Trust

By [A. O. SCOTT](#)

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 Rinkey, 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.

The Invisible War

Opens on Friday in New York, Los Angeles, Washington, San Francisco and Boston.

Written and directed by Kirby Dick; directors of photography, Thaddeus Wadleigh and Kirsten Johnson; edited by Doug Blush and Derek Boonstra; design and animation by Bil White; produced by Amy Ziering and Tanner King Barklow; released by Cinedigm Entertainment and Docurama Films. In Manhattan at the Village VII, 66 Third Avenue, at 11th Street, East Village. Running time: 1 hour 37 minutes. This film is not rated.



'The Invisible War' Documentary Exposes Military Sexual Assault

The Huffington Post | By [Molly O'Toole](#) Posted: 06/19/2012 6:02 pm Updated: 06/20/2012 10:50 am



Amy Ziering and Kirby Dick, producer and director of "The Invisible War," which won the Audience Award for U.S. documentary at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival.

Emmy-nominated producer Amy Ziering admitted she was looking at her phone during the announcement of the Audience Award for U.S. documentary at this year's Sundance Film Festival. She was thinking, "No one is going to vote for the rape film. They'll go for a happy movie."

Some five years before, Academy- and Emmy-nominated documentary maker Kirby Dick -- the son of a World War II veteran -- came across an [article on military sexual assault](#). After his initial shock, the "[This Film Is Not Yet Rated](#)" director began on the journey that would become "[The Invisible War](#)" -- a documentary probing at the depths of trauma caused by sexual assaults in the U.S. armed forces, dredging up the military's failings in addressing the issue and bringing survivors' stories to light.

Shortly after viewing the film, [Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced](#) what advocates call some of the most far-reaching reforms to the military's [sexual assault prevention and response policy](#) to date.

And to Ziering's surprise, "The Invisible War," which she produced and Dick wrote and directed, won the Audience Award at Sundance.

The Huffington Post spoke with Ziering and Dick Monday, before the movie's nationwide release June 22, to learn how they, too, were impacted by the making of the documentary.

What led you personally to this story, and what about the documentary medium did you feel could uniquely capture it?

Dick: Well, I think we were astounded by the numbers and the extent of the cover-up. And when we would talk to civilians, so few people had even heard of this.

A documentary is able to combine the sort of the facts side and the emotional side of the story, in a very powerful way ... the audience walks out with sort of a complete overview, statistical, historical, and also that they understand it from an emotional point of view, how they're women who really believe in the military, even after they've been assaulted.

Ziering: It does present a juggling act -- it's a very complex, complicated situation, to present all the analysis and factual parts correctly and still have it be a very moving experience.

How do you tell these women's stories without subjecting them to the kind of re-traumatization that many suffered after their assaults -- how did you navigate this very difficult emotional territory?

Ziering: I always told them that their mental health came first. Anything we were doing, really, I wanted them always to feel comfortable. I told them to just tell me if they didn't want to answer a question, or we would stop and start. And really meant it, sincerely.

Dick: She has three daughters, I think that really helped [her] relate. She always set it up as a very safe space from the beginning.

There was the moment when Kori Cioca [the central woman featured in the film] broke down, and [Ziering] just sort of left her seat and hugged her, saying, "You're safe, no one's gonna get you."

Ziering: I had forgotten about that, and then at Sundance someone asked [Cioca] about the interview process and she mentioned that story and said, 'You know, thank God for Ms. Amy ... In all my years, going to therapists, going to the VA, trying to get help, no one had articulated that. Held me, grounded me, and said, 'This is the past, it doesn't have to define me right now.'"

I didn't realize how hard -- I had never done this before and I didn't know about what it's like to hear trauma stories over and over again, and that was a very unique personal experience for me.

Dick: For them, it was kind of transformative. They were taking this trauma that had really devastated their lives and putting it to some positive use. Because every one of them said they decided to be in the film so it doesn't happen to other men and women who are serving now.

The military has for years pledged to eradicate sexual assault in the ranks, citing a policy of "zero tolerance" --after the making of this film, what do you feel are the chances of action being taken to make this a reality?

Ziering: What we hope is that the film's a game-changer in putting this on the public consciousness in a way that it's never been before. There's really been no pressure on the military.

The other reason we're hopeful is they've done a lot in response to the film, and not in a defensive way. ... That's pretty amazing.

Obviously we all should be cautious but ... we're worried, but we're positive at the same time.

Dick: The one thing they haven't done is they haven't stepped up and said, 'We have a huge problem here and we're gonna take care of it.' ... They really have a long way to go. When you have 19,000 a year being assaulted --

Ziering: And it's not just the assaults -- they're being discharged with personality disorders, there's retaliation on the survivor's themselves. That has to be immediately addressed and shut down.

Dick: Every citizen, every member of the military, every member of Congress, needs to continue putting pressure on them to do this.

Are there any plans for the film to be used as part of the military's training on sexual assault? Would you be open to that?

Dick: We would welcome that, and we're in discussions on that. We're absolutely open to that.

Ziering: Right after Sundance we were getting six to 10 weekly requests from bases saying, 'Can you send me the trailer? My internet is blocked, so I can't show it, so I just saw it in the coffee shop. This will help me with my training, I can use it.' They're on bases in Japan, Hawaii --

Dick: Afghanistan --

Ziering: They're saying, 'I'm sitting here working in the trenches on this issue.'

What was the most powerful moment during the making of the film?

Ziering: We just finished two days before [Sundance] for a lot of long and interesting reasons ... We hadn't really had a chance even to watch it. ... And after that very first screening, someone came up to me and said, 'I'm gonna take care of Kori. I'll pay for the surgery.' And another couple heard them and said, 'We're in, too.' We never could have imagined or dreamed or thought, that it would generate that kind of response and outpouring ... so that was one of the very -- it was full of powerful moments, but that was really the one.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



The Visible Costs Of The Military's 'Invisible War'

by [Mark Jenkins](#) June 21, 2012

In documentaries, showing is almost always more effective than telling. But *The Invisible War*, an expose of sexual assault in the U.S. military, is compelling despite being all talk. Footage of the many crimes recounted in the film is, of course, nonexistent — and would be nearly unwatchable if available.

So director Kirby Dick addresses the subject directly, without gimmicks or gambits. Stylistically, *The Invisible War* is conventional and plainspoken, from its opening clips of vintage recruitment ads for women to its closing updates on the central characters.

The movie's power comes from words and numbers, including the military's own official statistic that 20 percent of women in the services have been sexually assaulted — as well as the estimate that 80 percent of such attacks are never reported.

Dick and his team talked to more than 100 people for the movie, including many survivors of sexual assault. The latter, who are mostly but not exclusively female, were interviewed by co-producer Amy Ziering. The stories are different in detail, yet eerily similar in outline.

Nearly 40 years ago, Susan Brownmiller wrote in *Against Our Will* that "rape is not a crime of lust, but of violence and power." *The Invisible War* supports this assessment at every turn. Soldiers and sailors are often abused by their superiors, and are strongly discouraged from reporting such crimes by officers further up the chain of command.

Here are two of the more astonishing aspects of the military response to sexual assault: Sometimes victims are required to report the crime to the person who committed it; and women who are raped by married men are often charged with adultery while their attackers go unpunished.

Such a system, says Army criminal investigator Sgt. Myla Haider, is designed principally "to help women get raped better." It certainly helps explain the 80-percent-unreported rate.

The movie depicts the military's culture of intimidation and assault as global, not as an aberration that might be explained by the pressures of combat or the tedium of life on secluded posts. One interviewee was repeatedly drugged and raped while serving at a remote base in Alaska. But two others — one unidentified because she's still on active duty — describe the Marine Barracks in Washington, D.C., about 10 blocks from the U.S. Capitol, as ranking among the riskiest postings for women in the entire American military.

The thread linking the various stories is the case of Kori Cioca, a Coast Guard veteran attacked while serving in Michigan. Her assailant beat her, leaving her with post-traumatic stress and a dislocated jaw. Years later, the movie observes as the Department of Veterans Affairs repeatedly refuses to treat her, and a class-action suit she joined is dismissed because rape is an "occupational hazard" of a career in uniform.

This may be his most wrenching film, but Dick has previously investigated related subjects. His documentaries include *Outrage*, an expose of closeted gay politicians who support anti-gay policies; and the lighter-hearted *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, which considered the MPAA's classifications, especially R and NC-17. *The Invisible War* is closest, however, to *Twist of Faith*, Dick's look at pederasty in the Catholic Church.

Compared with the church, Dick said in a recent interview, the military seems to be moving quickly to change its ways. *The Invisible War* ends by noting that Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has begun to alter the military's procedures to support sexual assault victims and make prosecutions more likely. At the end of a movie that's both chilling and inflaming, this postscript offers a tiny ration of relief.