

I always thought that there was something off about the women standing behind a bank of press microphones with Gloria Allred aside them, accusing some public figure of sexual misconduct. Not that I don't believe them, just why be so public about something so intimate? I think sexual assault should be handled with care, sobriety and in private; not with keg lights and a reporter from TMZ. At least that used to be my narrow perspective until I was forced to see that a victim's reticent is a co-conspirator with the perpetrator of a sexual assault.

Ambiguity. That is the word that describes the events of that Saturday night. Maybe I didn't tell him no. Maybe I drank too much to honestly remember what happened. Maybe it was all just a misunderstanding. What I did know afterwards was that the shame, embarrassment and the emotional instability were unrelenting and all I could see.

Monday morning was awful. My first reaction to anything terrible is denial. "I was not sexually assaulted," I would think to myself, "... and even if I was, I'm a better woman than those who wallow in their victimhood.". That mentality got me to lunch chow. I have a far greater belief in my power to hide my emotions, than my actual ability to do so. A couple of soldiers, even one under me, asked me if I was okay. Every time my well-being was inquired about, the fragile scaffolding of my emotional resolve to "get over it" would be dealt a serious blow. I knew enough about myself and the environment I was in that I could not proceed without help.

Many times in the United States Army, you really do not need your full faculties to operate. In fact, it's an advantage if you put them aside. However, there are some moments when you need every last capability you have inside yourself to succeed. I knew my current mental and emotional state would fail both me and my fellow soldiers if one of those critical moments came. I proceeded with filing what the Army refers to as a restricted sexual assault report.

I still wasn't a 100% sold on the idea that I was even the victim of an assault at the time of my filing a restricted report. I just knew that I could inconspicuously and quietly seek the help I needed. At

the time, my main concern was my ability to perform my duties and protect my professional reputation that I had spent years developing, which as a female in a male-dominated MOS is no easy task. In retrospect, I am eternally grateful for the Army to have developed the institutional relief valve that is the restricted sexual assault report mechanism; I am not too sure that if I had to be public with my situation I would have sought help at all.

The counseling I received helped me to see that Saturday night with far more focus and clarity. What I experienced was without a doubt, a sexual assault. What's more, is that the sexual assault challenged who I was and what I thought I should be. Being a woman in the army is to constantly de-emphasize everything that makes you a woman and strive to be "one of the boys". To not be emotional. To not complain. To "take it like a man". These principles were, above almost all else, what I saw I needed to succeed in the United States Army. And to be a "sexual assault victim", as I was, caused more than anything else, an identity crisis. To reconcile who I was before the sexual assault and who I was after was a monumental task. But I was able to do exactly that, because of the counseling I was afforded through restricted reporting that helped me find myself—a better self—than I was before.

I understand now that I had a somewhat skewed idea of how a woman can achieve and thrive in the United States Army. I cannot be "one of the boys", because I am not "one of the boys", and why would I want to be one? Myself, and all women have different, and in many cases, better talents to bring to the table. I think that those women, standing behind a bank of microphones aside Gloria Allred, and women I viewed like them in the United States Army, were what I viewed as my opposites. That I used them as foils, to prove *who I wasn't*; to prove to all my male colleagues that I was "one of the guys" and not *one of those women*. This, after everything, is what I am most ashamed of. I am certainly not grateful for the awful experience I had at the hands of a fellow soldier, but I am glad that I can now view myself and the army in a more constructive and personally fulfilling light. There was just one more issue I had to resolve.

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We Are Strong

If I was no longer the person constantly trying to prove themselves to their male colleagues, and someone who had a more enlightened view of who I was, didn't I have an obligation to all soldiers—especially female soldiers—to make the institution of the United State Army better by bringing to justice a soldier willing attack and violate so viciously a fellow soldier? So that's what I did. The Army allows a restricted sexual assault report to be changed to an unrestricted report, which initiates an official investigation. Restricted reporting is a critical tool for victims to seek help, and allow them to regain control over their lives and continue their careers in the service. I begrudge no victim who does not change their their report to an unrestricted one. However, for me, it was the logical next step in my healing process to resolve the emotional trauma, but more importantly to use the pain and suffering of my experience for something greater than myself. That I would not sit idly by while a sexual assault perpetrator was allowed to continue to serve in the Army while paying no price for the crimes he committed against me. I also wanted to prove to every other soldier, that seeking help is not a weakness, but a strength—that an Army who has soldiers wiling to ask for help when it's needed, is an Army far stronger than one that doesn't.