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Good afternoon Members of the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel.

I would like to start off by thanking, Chairwoman Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, as well as Ranking Member Senator Thom Tillis for inviting me here to testify.

My name is Natalie Khawam. I am an Attorney, and the President and Founder of the Whistleblower Law Firm. I am a proud graduate of Georgetown University Law Center. Prior to law school, I achieved an MBA in healthcare, and an MS degree in healthcare finance.

I am the attorney for the late Army Specialist Vanessa Guillen and her family, who was brutally murdered while serving our country at Ft Hood, Texas.

I treasure this country and the men and women who serve to protect us. I was born in war-torn Lebanon. When I was young, my family and I immigrated to the United States and became the beneficiaries of all the hopes and dreams that this great country offers. My accomplishments result from the hard work ethic that my parents instilled in me, and as such, I have made it my calling to give back to this great country that accepted my family and made the United States of America our home.

As I stated, I represent another family that also immigrated to this great country, the late Vanessa Guillen, as well as the Guillen family.

Vanessa Guillen was a 20-year-old Specialist in the United States Army, serving with honor at Fort Hood, TX.

Vanessa Guillen had been assigned to protect and defend this country, its citizens, and our valued freedom. Then on April 22, 2020, following months of being sexually harassed and assaulted, a fellow soldier horrifically murdered Vanessa.

Her murder deserves justice. That is why we are here today to pursue justice for Vanessa and countless other service members. They have and are continuing to suffer the injustice of sexual harassment, assault, and even murder while serving our nation. Vanessa's horrific murder has sparked the Guillen family, myself, and many others spearheading the #MeToo movement within the military.

Since her murder, we, along with others, have been exposing the profound dark secret embedded in the underbelly of the military when it comes to reporting and bringing justice to military victims of sexual assault and harassment. Just search #IAMVANESSAGUILLEN, you will see the thousands of stories shared by soldiers just like Vanessa, who are victims of sexual assault, violence, and harassment. These courageous women and men have shared their personal stories of how their assailants and the system victimized them.

Every two years, the Defense Department's Office of People Analytics releases the Workplace and Gender Relations Survey (WGRS) of Active-Duty Members. This survey estimates the prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment and assesses the unit and command culture. The Workplace and Gender Relations Survey from FY 18 found that in 2018 - 20,500 servicemembers were victims of sexual assault. Still, there were only 6,053 reports of sexual assault by servicemembers for incidents that occurred during military service. That is only 29.5% of the victims reporting assaults. Why is this so? This is unacceptable to those victims and should well be unacceptable to military leaders and the United States Senate.

Since then, nothing has changed. DOD reported in FY19 that military services received 7,825 reports of sexual assault involving Servicemembers as either victims or subjects. 6,888 of these reports were made by Servicemembers, and in only 795 of these cases were sexual assault charges filed, of which 363 went to trial, and only 264 were convicted of any charge at trial. Over six-thousand reports filed, and only 795 assailants charged; a mere 3.8% were convicted. This is not justice.

As the attorney for Vanessa Guillen, her family, and many other victims and their families, they deserve justice and equity. My law firm receives hundreds of calls and emails weekly, looking for assistance and help. But as the law and system are today is almost impossible to bring them justice. The stories we are told are heart wrenching.

The inability to attain justice for these victims motivated me to seek change so that this tragedy won't continue for all the other Vanesa Guillens in our military. The system is broken and doesn't work. The WGRS 2018 found that military women have a statistically significantly lower level of trust in the military structure. Only "sixty-three percent of woman trusted that the military system would protect their privacy if they were sexually assaulted, sixty-nine percent of women trusted the military system to ensure their safety following a sexual assault incident, and sixty-six percent of women trusted the military system to treat them with dignity and respect if they were sexually assaulted. But those who do choose to report often fare even worse. This same DOD report states that combining reprisal, ostracism, and maltreatment, "roughly two-thirds of women who experienced and reported sexual assault perceived experiencing a behavior in line with retaliation."

Many servicemembers rightfully believe that reporting, the lack of justice, and the probable reprisal are not worth reporting and can be as devastating as the actual sexual assault. I have told many people awareness alone isn't going to fix this issue within our military; it will take legislation.

As many of you may know, last year, while representing MSG. Richard Stayskal, a highly decorated Green Beret from North Carolina who is dying of Stage IV lung cancer, through Congress, we achieved a significant change in the law when it came to the Feres Doctrine. Unfortunately, while the bill's original draft included sexual assault and harassment to protect our soldiers further, that language was deleted from the final bill. Victims of sexual harassment and assault deserve the same rights afforded in the Stayskal law to pursue their claims. Now that the horror of Vanessa Guillen murder has brought to light this tragedy coupled with the momentum that the #IAMVanessaGuillen has produced, the victims, their families, and I know that the time has come to provide true justice for Vanessa Guillen's and the future women and men protecting us in the military. They serve around the globe faceless and unknown, protecting our nation; now it is time to protect them and bring the victims the justice and protection they have earned and deserve.

The military continues to argue they are "improving" and that no changes are needed. However, it is clear that the military's failure to handle sexual assault cases has had a disastrous effect of how all servicemembers look at military justice. Such failures have had a significant negative effect on morale and good order and discipline.

Our military, the American people, and Congress will not tolerate such inadequate efforts the DOD has provided our service members, and it's now time for a change.

The Military Justice Improvement Act will provide justice for Vanessa Guillen and others similarly situated and give future victims of military sexual assault and harassment an independent judicial forum that they can have confidence in and no fear of retribution and as victims the right to pursue a claim.

On behalf of Vanessa Guillen, her family, and the many other victims I represent, I want to thank the Chair and Ranking Member for inviting me to discuss this vital issue.

We must not allow Vanessa Guillen's tragic death to be in vain. Congress should and must act to protect our soldiers from sexual assault and harassment now and in the future.



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