

'Invisible War' documentary examines rape in the military

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Documentary filmmaker Kirby Dick's "[The Invisible War](#)" is a study of [rape in the U.S. military](#) that leaves viewers weeping and seething. It may be the Los Angeles director's most harrowing film to date, but it's not a departure from his usual concerns.

Dick's first critical success was 1997's "[Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist](#)," an account of a performance artist who used erotic pain to contend with his cystic fibrosis. Subsequently, the director made documentaries about the sexual politics of the Motion Picture Association of America's R and NC-17 labels ("[This Film Is Not Yet Rated](#)"), child molestation by Catholic priests ("[Twist of Faith](#)") and closeted gay politicians who support anti-gay laws ("[Outrage](#)"). Even "[Derrida](#)," the 2002 biography of the French philosopher that was Dick's first collaboration with "Invisible War" producer Amy Ziering, touched on gender roles.

"I am drawn to these sorts of subjects," Dick says. "They're fertile ground for discussing larger issues in American society."

"The Invisible War" reports, using Defense Department statistics, that more than 20 percent of women in the military have reported a sexual assault. The department estimates that about 80 percent of such assaults, which affect many men as well as women, are not reported. (Some of these same numbers have been featured recently in a "[Doonesbury](#)" story line.)

The film notes that women are often penalized for alleging sexual assault and are required to report such attacks to



(Larry Busacca/Getty Images) - Director Kirby Dick poses for a portrait during the 2012 Sundance Film Festival at the Getty Images Portrait Studio at T-Mobile Village at the Lift on January 21, 2012 in Park City, Utah.

their chain-of-command superior, who in some cases is the accused rapist. Single women raped by married men have been charged with adultery, while their attackers go unpunished.

The standard U.S. military approach to sexual assault is designed "to help women get raped better," Army criminal investigator Sgt. Myla Haider says in the movie.

"We aren't going to comment on the film or the cases in the film," says Cynthia O. Smith, a spokeswoman for the Defense Department's press office. But she notes that procedures have changed since Leon E. Panetta became defense secretary last year.

After interviewing more than 70 victims — they use the term "survivors" — Dick and Ziering are not disinterested observers. They visited Washington early this month with the hope of reaching filmgoers and policy shapers.

"There are two audiences for this movie," says Dick, sitting with his collaborator in a downtown theater one morning. "There's the usual documentary audience, and then there are the decision makers."

Since “The Invisible War” won the Audience Award for best documentary at the Sundance Film Festival in January, copies have circulated at the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill. “We call it a grass-top, rather than a grass-roots, approach,” Ziering says.

“We know that Panetta has seen it, and that he was very moved,” Dick says. The movie now ends with the note that Panetta has changed procedures for prosecuting sexual assault in the military, taking responsibility for the cases away from local unit commanders.