

SPC Vanessa Guillen’s death had nothing to do with sexual harassment or sexual assault – so how did #IAmVanessaGuillen become the military’s #MeToo?

Disclaimer: nothing that follows should be attributed to anyone other than myself; these are my opinions, and mine alone.

SPC Vanessa Guillen was murdered. There is no evidence that in any way connects her murder to sexual harassment or sexual assault. Nonetheless, #IAmVanessaGuillen quickly became the battle cry of a movement, [described by NPR](#) as “presenting the U.S. military with its own #MeToo moment.” This has been the dominant narrative in the Vanessa Guillen story, which was in the national spotlight with celebrity endorsements and protest marches to boot. It was also a large part of the impetus behind the [investigation into Fort Hood, and a resulting report](#) described as “[scathing,](#)” [which resulted in the firing of Fort Hood leadership.](#)¹

Publicly available sources show a generally coherent picture regarding the main facts of SPC Guillen’s murder, with a few contradictions regarding ancillary matters. A timeline of SPC Guillen’s disappearance and the ensuing investigation is available [here](#), on [WikiPedia](#), and [here as a video](#) published on August 10.

SPC Guillen disappeared on April 22, 2020. She was reported missing the next day. Although the video in the prior link claims the Guillen family’s press conference on June 10 alleged that SPC Guillen was sexually harassed, the actual [footage of the family’s press conference](#) on that date does not support this. Instead, the June 10 bilingual press conference alleged primarily a lack of respect and incompetence on the part of investigators, and demanded Congressional action, also asking for support from the Hispanic community and others. The first allegation seems to have been made by the family attorney, Natalie Khawam, on or about June 16, as noted below, in the report by Steve Campion of ABC 13, titled “[Family says Vanessa Guillen made sexual harassment outcry before disappearing.](#)”

The allegations of sexual harassment seem to originate from Ms. Khawam’s June 16 claim that she discovered two incidents of sexual harassment: the first involved a superior allegedly walking in on her showering, and the second was a “verbal assault” in Spanish. Judging by [Ms. Khawam’s Facebook page](#), June 16, 2020 was also the date she first was “honored to represent Vanessa Guillen’s family and their search for justice.” In a different report linked from Ms. Khawam’s Facebook page, the allegation is that SPC Guillen was “sexually harassed by one of her sergeants before her disappearance.” The allegation generally seems to have been that whatever harassment occurred was not reported because SPC Guillen feared retaliation from the superior against whom she would otherwise have made the report. SPC Robinson could

¹ The report itself is available online and a link to it has been [posted on CAAFLog](#). It makes a vague reference to “recent events,” which surely at least in part alludes to the much-publicized disappearance of SPC Guillen. It also specifically mentions SPC Guillen’s disappearance, the Guillen family, and civil rights organizations concerned with SPC Guillen’s case, further supporting the conclusion that the report was in substantial part motivated by this case.

not have been that person, because he was the same rank as SPC Guillen, and not a Sergeant.

Whatever the origins of the alleged sexual harassment may be, no one can reasonably dispute that there is no evidence to support that 20 year old SPC Aaron Robinson, the Soldier who we now know murdered 20 year old SPC Guillen before taking his own life when confronted by authorities, sexually harassed SPC Guillen before he killed her.

Moreover, Army investigators have [searched SPC Robinson](#) and SPC Guillen's phone records and found no evidence of sexual harassment or any type of relationship between them. A July 2 report states "[Army officials dispute claims Vanessa Guillen was sexually harassed before her disappearance.](#)" Robinson's girlfriend, 22 year old Cecily Anne Aguilar, who [helped mutilate SPC Guillen's body to cover up the murder](#) and is facing charges for her role in the murder, claimed that [the motive for the murder was the fact that SPC Guillen planned to report SPC Robinson for having a relationship with a married woman \(Aguilar\).](#)

Apart from the vague allegations made by the Guillen family's attorney after she was retained to represent them in this case, I have not found any publicly available evidence to suggest that there was any sort of sexual harassment involving SPC Vanessa Guillen by anyone, and certainly not by SPC Robinson. Nonetheless, the disappearance of Vanessa Guillen became the military's "MeToo" movement in public discourse, shortly after Ms. Khawam's allegations and celebrity social media campaigns took off with the #IAmVanessaGuillen hashtag.

By the time NPR aired the above-referenced report on July 8, the allegations of sexual harassment were simply accepted as fact. The NPR report was based solely on the views of retired Army Colonel (COL) Ellen Haring of the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN), a non-profit organization, which describes itself as a "member-driven community network advocating for the individual and collective needs of service women." COL Haring's argument is difficult to follow due to the incomprehensibly tortured logic with which she seems to assert that SPC Guillen's tragic death was somehow precipitated by the Army's general failure to take seriously allegations of sexual harassment and sexual assault, despite the lack of evidence of any connection between these and SPC Guillen's death. COL Haring repeats the allegation that appears to have been made public for the first time on June 16 by Ms. Khawam, stating that SPC Guillen told "her mother she was being harassed." The report contains no mention of any evidence of prior harassment or assault, nor any explanation as to how these things, if they occurred, are related to the brutal murder of SPC Guillen. No one, not even COL Haring, claims that SPC Guillen made any report of sexual harassment or assault to anyone in the Army.

COL Haring and others who allege that the military does not take sexual harassment and sexual assault seriously are simply wrong. This is true, notwithstanding the findings of the Fort Hood report - whether well-supported or calculated to address emotionally charged issues artificially inflated by those COL Haring, Ms. Khawam, and others who

make their living by fueling public outrage. The measures the Army took to address these allegations and the findings of the subsequent report show to what lengths the Army is willing to go to prove that it takes allegations of sexual harassment seriously (even if unsubstantiated, as in the case of the allegations made by Ms. Khawam on behalf of the deceased SPC Guillen). To clarify: even accepting the findings of the report regarding the ineffectiveness of the SHARP program at Fort Hood, no one involved in dealing with prosecuting sexual assault allegations (whether prosecution, defense, victim advocate, etc.) can credibly argue that the Army generally does not take sexual harassment and sexual assault seriously.

Conversely, the 2017 “Report on Barriers to the Fair Administration of Military Justice in Sexual Assault Cases” by the Subcommittee of the Judicial Proceedings Panel, established by the Secretary of Defense, summarized the politically-driven changes to the handling of sexual assault allegations in the military, noting that many changes to the military’s handling of sexual assault allegations have resulted from “a huge public outcry about the problem of sexual assault in the military” based on public perceptions shaped by the media and certain political proponents. The report notes that some of the resulting changes have been constructive, while others have “[raised serious questions about the fundamental fairness of the military justice process when it comes to the treatment of the accused.](#)” There have been other similar concerns noted since.

It is easy to see parallels here. By turning Vanessa Guillen’s murder into a story about sexual harassment and assault, the advocates of outrage have distorted the facts and used anecdotal evidence to make claims regarding complex issues (a [logical fallacy in itself](#), but especially when there is no evidence at all to back up any claimed relationship between alleged sexual harassment and the tragic death of SPC Guillen). Perhaps the “scathing report” and the firing of leadership at Fort Hood will satisfy the demands of public outrage. But legislative over-reaction would not be entirely unexpected.