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Sexism and Racism Lurk in Don't Ask, Don't Tell Enforcement

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By [Anuradha K. Bhagwati](#): former Marine and executive director of Service Women's Action Network



Repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell has never been closer. The long-awaited Pentagon report on the implications of repealing Don't Ask Don't Tell will finally be released today with Senate hearings and a full Senate vote on repeal expected within days. The study by the Pentagon Comprehensive Review Working Group includes the results of a highly-anticipated survey of active duty and reserve troops about their attitudes toward homosexuality and the policy which prohibits openly gay service. Not surprisingly, 70 percent of indicated that the effect of repeal would be "positive, mixed, or non-existent." Times seem to have changed.

But if perceptions have changed with respect to gay and lesbian servicemembers overall, albeit at a painfully slow pace, discriminatory attitudes about gender and race within the military still remain deeply rooted.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) has long fed off the hatred of unwanted and vulnerable personnel, namely, women and people of color. Since the inception of the policy, servicewomen have been disproportionately impacted compared to their male counterparts. While the proportion of men discharged under DADT has decreased steadily over time, the proportion of women discharged has increased. And yet, the percentage of total women in the military has remained steady over that period. Last year, though women made up 14 percent of the total military population, they made up a shocking 39 percent of DADT discharges. In other words, women are currently expelled from the military under DADT at almost three times the rate at which they serve.

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To make matters worse, people of color in the US military are also disproportionately impacted. For instance, in 2008, people of color made up 29 percent of the total military population, but made up 45 percent of discharges under DADT. As with women, the impact on people of color has increased over time. People of color made up only 25 percent of all DADT discharges in 1997, but currently make up about one-third.

How do we explain these numbers and trends?

Firstly, DADT is a policy which is randomly enforced. A chain of command that believes more in getting the job done than in crucifying gays and lesbians will avoid enforcing the policy. But for those commanders with axes to grind against individual servicemembers, DADT becomes a convenient way to oust unwanted personnel from the ranks. In this way, racist and misogynistic attitudes get combined with or subsumed by homophobic policy.

Women are particularly vulnerable under this policy because of their subjection to lesbian-baiting, the practice of being intimidated and pressured for sex by using the threat of being labeled a lesbian. Lesbian-baiting affects all servicewomen, both lesbian and heterosexual. Like all sexual harassment, it is difficult to report, and it is rare to find a sympathetic commander willing to punish a perpetrator.

Women are also a hyper-visible minority within the armed forces. In the Marine Corps, for instance, women make up just 6 percent of the total population. Servicewomen overall are subjected to often daily sexual advances and harassment by their male counterparts. Regardless of their marital status, their private lives are scrutinized and made public within their units. If they refuse to date fellow servicemen, or do not disclose who they are dating, they are often suspected of being or labeled as lesbian. If they do not conform to pre-determined gender roles—if they are perceived as too tough, too butch, or too successful—they are also subjected to lesbian-baiting.

The influence of racism on DADT discharges is just as pernicious. Racism in the armed forces tends to be naively discounted, despite such glaring counter-evidence as the influence of hate groups within the military and the overwhelming absence of people of color among officer ranks.

What happens to Don't Ask, Don't Tell this month remains to be seen. Either way, the military needs to beef up its enforcement of equal opportunity policies—the regulations designed to protect servicemembers from discrimination and sexual harassment. If women and people of color are still unprotected from perpetrators of abuse and hatred, gays and lesbians will face the same broken system when more choose to come out of the closet.

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