

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Anu Bhagwati, and I am a former Marine Corps Captain.

I served for five years, with many gay and lesbian Marines, both enlisted and officer.

My best friend in the Marines was an incredible officer. She was also a lesbian. Because of this, she wasn't allowed to live a normal life. While I could walk down the street holding the hand of my male partner, she could not do the same with her loved one, for fear of being outed.

Despite the enormous strain of living under the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy, my friend volunteered to serve for a year in Iraq, knowing that because she was lesbian, she wouldn't be able to easily correspond with her partner back home. A couple of years after returning home from Iraq, she was discharged under the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy.

What happened to my friend was unfair, wrong and un-American.

Unfortunately, my friend's story is all too common, especially as it concerns women in the military. While women make up only 15% of the entire armed forces, they make up almost 50% of last year's Army and Air Force discharges under Don't Ask Don't Tell.

Race is another relevant factor in these discharges. African-American women are discharged under Don't Ask Don't Tell at three times the rate that they serve in the armed forces.

These statistics are not evidence that the military is upholding unit cohesion, good order and discipline, or any of the other convenient catch-phrases used by proponents of this archaic and useless policy. These statistics are, at the least, shocking, and at the worst, shameful.

Numbers like this originate from an ugly context, which we must discuss. Sexual harassment of women in uniform is pervasive. Lesbian-baiting is simply another insidious manifestation of sexual harassment. Many servicewomen risk two equally devastating prospects, as far as their professional careers are concerned: resist a serviceman's advances and be labeled lesbian, or don't resist, and get labeled promiscuous. Being labeled a lesbian, even by rumor, can prompt an investigation that ends in discharge.

I currently direct Service Women's Action Network (SWAN), a non-partisan non-profit organization that serves both current US servicewomen and women veterans. SWAN's "About Face" initiative exposes the disproportionate targeting of servicewomen, and servicewomen of color in particular, by the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy.

I was proud to wear the uniform, and proud to serve my country. Don't Ask Don't Tell is a blemish on the spirit with which Americans choose to serve, and on the values which we defend.