



Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Women in the Military

The Facts

Women and men with non-heterosexual orientations are blatantly discriminated against under the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) policy. DADT prohibits openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals from serving in the military.¹ Both women and minority service members are discharged at significantly higher rates than their male and white counterparts. Women, regardless of their sexual orientation, are especially targeted under DADT. Discharges because of sexual orientation carry myriad negative consequences, including career jeopardy, denial of benefits, and loss of personal privacy and freedom to disclose one’s sexuality.

- Although women made up 15% of the armed forces in 2008, 34% of service members discharged were women.
- The impact of DADT on women varies according to service branch. For example, women comprised only 20% of the Air Force yet made up 62% of Air Force discharges. (DADT discharges by branch listed below)²

Service Branch	Percent women discharged under DADT	Percent women serving in branch
Army	36%	14%
Navy	23%	15%
Marine Corps	18%	6%
Air Force	62%	20%

Source: The Palm Center (discharge data) and the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (gender composition by branch). For more information, see www.palmcenter.org and www.deomi.org.

¹ While transgender individuals are not explicitly banned from service under the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, they are often assumed to have non-heterosexual orientations and are therefore heavily targeted under the policy. Transgender individuals are generally not accepted in the military and are effectively precluded from joining in the first place. For more information, see the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (<http://www.sldn.org/pages/legal-issues>).

² In 2008, 21 servicemembers were discharged from the Coast Guard under DADT. The Coast Guard does not provide a demographic breakdown by gender or race (<http://servicemembersunited.org/?=1559>).

- Racial minorities are also disproportionately affected by Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Non-white active duty service members represent 29.4% of the total military population, but comprise 45% of all DADT discharges in 2008. The table below shows the percentages of discharges under DADT by racial group and Hispanic ethnicity:

Race/Ethnic Group	Percent discharged under DADT
White (non-Hispanic)	55%
Black	20%
American Indian	3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	8%
Other/Unknown	5%
Hispanic*	9%

Source: Servicemembers United (www.servicemembersunited.org)

* Hispanics included those who identified as racially white. Hispanics who identified with other races were excluded from the Hispanic category.

Note: Service members in the Other/Unknown category were counted as non-white even though it is conceivable that some of these individuals might identify as white. However, a separate calculation that excluded the Other/Unknown category revealed negligible differences in percentages.

In addition to discriminating against non-heterosexuals and disproportionately impacting women and minorities, DADT is also inconsistent with the opinion of the public and military personnel. Although the policy accurately reflected both public opinion and military members' preferences regarding gays in the military at the time of its 1993 inception, views have changed.³ Since the early 1990's, attitudes towards gays in the military have increasingly liberalized, with a majority of the public opposed to DADT. Relevant statistics are listed below:

- 58-79% of the American public believes that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly in the military.⁴
- A survey of potential military recruits revealed that 56% said the DADT policy had no effect on their impression of the military while a quarter said it made them feel embarrassed of the military.⁵
- A 2006 survey of members who served in Iraq and Afghanistan found that almost 75% are personally comfortable interacting with gays and lesbians.⁶
- A majority of junior enlisted members believe that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly in the military.⁷

³ For more information about the history of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," see the Palm Center (www.palmcenter.org).

⁴ Aaron Belkin. 2009. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Does the Gay Ban Undermine the Military's Reputation?" *Armed Forces & Society* 34 (2): 276-291.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Informal Forms of Exclusion in the Military

In addition to being formally excluded from the military, LGBT service members also endure informal discriminatory treatment from their peers and superiors in the military. Service members suspected of homosexuality are frequently harassed, mocked, and generally experience hostile treatment based on their real or perceived sexual orientation. Women are especially vulnerable to so-called *lesbian baiting*, defined as “the practice of pressuring women for sex and sexually harassing women by using the threat of calling them lesbians as a means of intimidation.”⁸ Women in the military who do not conform to gender stereotypes or refuse to engage in sexual activity with men are at risk of being labeled a lesbian, regardless of their true sexual preferences. Some of the increased scrutiny of service women’s sexuality is undoubtedly the result of women’s hyper-visibility in the military, along with the attitude that women do not belong in service.

LGBT service members’ partners are also denied many rights that heterosexual partners and spouses enjoy. For example, service members cannot list their partner as “next of kin,” meaning that in the case of injury, illness, or death, the surviving partner of the LGBT service member will not be notified. Additionally, married service members and their spouses receive a host of benefits, including higher pay rate, health benefits, housing subsidy, and family support services that LGBT service members with committed life partners are denied.

Transgender individuals also endure many forms of exclusion in the military. In the first place, individuals who have undergone genital surgery in order to change their gender may be denied the opportunity to serve in the military at all. Furthermore, individuals diagnosed with “gender identity disorder” are barred from serving in the military, which effectively excludes most open transgender individuals. Like lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, transgender servicemembers are subject to harassment, hostile treatment, and are generally unwelcome in the military. Also, even though transgenders are not necessarily gay, lesbian, or bisexual, they may be assumed to be and thus targeted under DADT.⁹

Informal Forms of Exclusion out of the Military

LGBT veterans continue to endure hostile treatment and discrimination out of the military. Unlike heterosexual married couples, LGBT veterans in committed partnerships are unable to secure healthcare for their partners nor are they eligible for family counseling services and support.

LGBT veterans may also be less likely to utilize Veterans Affairs health services because of perceived discrimination. Many studies document how women are less likely to use VA healthcare because of perceived male bias in services and treatment and because they feel the

⁸ Legal Policy Department of the Campaign for Military Service (1993).

⁹ Servicemembers Legal Defense Network. “Transgender Service Members.” Available: <http://www.sldn.org/pages/transgender-issues>

environment is unwelcoming and hostile.¹⁰ While little research exists that examines how LGBT veterans perceive the VA, anecdotal evidence suggests that LGBT veterans do receive discriminatory treatment.



What SWAN Does

--SWAN works to educate policymakers on the negative ramifications of DADT and specifically how this policy affects the lives of women and people of color.

--SWAN has created a support helpline for LGBT servicewomen and veterans that is staffed exclusively by women veteran case workers.

--SWAN is establishing support groups for LGBT servicewomen and veterans in Los Angeles, CA and New York, NY.

--SWAN maintains a Speaker Bureau that allows staff members, clients, and affiliates to speak out about the ramifications of DADT at conferences, panels, and other public events.

For more information, please contact policy@servicewomen.org or call (212) 683-0015 x324.

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¹⁰ Campbell and Raja. 2005. "The Sexual Assault and Secondary Victimization of Female Veterans: Help-Seeking Experiences with Military and Civilian Social Systems." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 29 (1): 97-106; Kelly et al. 2008. "Effects of Military Trauma Exposure on Women Veterans' Use and Perceptions of Veterans Health Administration Care." *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 23 (6):741-747.