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Lesbian Baiting in the Military: Institutionalized Sexual Harassment Under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue"

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LESBIAN BAITING IN THE MILITARY: INSTITUTIONALIZED SEXUAL HARASSMENT UNDER “DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL, DON’T PURSUE”

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INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 500

I. “DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL, DON’T PURSUE” ............................................................ 503

II. LESBIAN BAITING .................................................................................................... 507

III. HARASSMENT OF WOMEN IN THE MILITARY ................................................. 511

   A. Reported Sexual Harassment .................................................................................. 511

   B. Unreported Gender Harassment in the Military .................................................... 514

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS .............................................................................................. 519

CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................. 522

The fact that I wasn’t dating openly sparked rumors that I was homosexual. . . . You can’t win.
— Air Force Lieutenant Kelly Flinn

J.D. Candidate, Washington College of Law, American University, 1999; B.A., American University, 1992. I wish to thank Michelle Benecke, Kelly Corbett, and Nancy Polikoff for their insights and guidance on this Comment; my mother, Ann Damiano, for her love and support; my great-grandmother, Sabina Tarentino, for teaching me bravery and endurance; and Nada, for getting me through it all.

1. Elaine Sciolino, From a Love Affair to a Court Martial, N.Y. TIMES, May 11, 1997, at 1, quoted in C. DIXON OSBURN & MICHELLE M. BENECKE, SERVICEMEMBERS LEGAL DEFENSE NETWORK, CONDUCT UNBECOMING: THE FOURTH ANNUAL REPORT ON “DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL, DON’T PURSUE” 57 (1998) [hereinafter SLDN, FOURTH ANNUAL REPORT]. Lieutenant Flinn rose to national fame in 1997 when the military discovered her affair with a married civilian man, which is against Air Force regulations. Id. at A1. Rather than face a court martial and a possible nine-and-one-half years in prison, Flinn accepted a general discharge from the Air Force. Id. at A1. In doing so, Flinn is no longer eligible for veterans’ benefits and must pay the Air Force an estimated $18,000-$19,000 owed for the cost of her academy education, which she expected to pay off while serving in the military. Id. at A1.
Female servicemembers endure challenges to their careers that their male counterparts generally have not faced since the inception of the military. For many years the United States did not permit women to serve their country at all. Later, however, the United States permitted women to serve only in auxiliary branches of the military. Eventually the military disbanded the women’s auxiliary corps and permitted women to serve in the main branches of the military with their male counterparts.

A hostile climate still exists toward women servicemembers despite the many years that the United States has attempted to incorporate women into the main branches of the military. In addition to sexual harassment and policies that may create obstacles for women’s advancement within the military, lesbian baiting also serves as an...
 effective tool to keep women in an inferior role in the military, and furthermore, to reaffirm the military’s patriarchal power structure. Lesbian baiting is a type of sexual harassment. Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a self-professed “watchdog” over the Department of Defense’s implementation of the policy “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue,” explains the effects of the military’s policy on women:

[**Women**, straight and gay, are accused as lesbians when they rebuff advances by men or report sexual abuse. Women who are top performers in nontraditional fields also face perpetual speculation and rumors that they are lesbian.]

The regulation on gays and lesbians serving in the military, commonly known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue,” actually worsened the plight of gay and lesbian servicemembers in many circumstances even though the media and the government lauded the policy when it was issued. The regulation has taken a particular

while the government did not permit women to fly fighters and other armed aircraft, women did fly slower, unarmed aircraft into and out of combat areas during the Persian Gulf War. Congress ultimately permitted women to participate in combat assignments, excluding ground combat. 10 U.S.C. § 113 (1997).

8. See generally discussion infra Part II. The physical design of military technology, such as weapons and planes, may also keep women in lower ranks. See Nina Richman-Loo & Rachel Weber, Gender and Weapons Design, in IT’S OUR MILITARY, TOO! WOMEN AND THE U.S. MILITARY 136, 138 (Judith Hicks Stehm ed., 1996) (noting that despite policies that appear to be gender-neutral, aircraft and ship design generally have been crafted to fit male, not female, bodies comfortably).

9. See C. DIXON OSBURN, MICHELLE M. BENECKE & KIRK CHILDRESS, SERVICEMEMBERS LEGAL DEFENSE NETWORK, CONDUCT UNBECOMING: THE THIRD ANNUAL REPORT ON “DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL, DON’T PURSUE” 21 (1997) [hereinafter SLDN, THIRD ANNUAL REPORT] (defining lesbian baiting as “the practice of pressuring and harassing women by calling or threatening to call them, ‘lesbian’”).

10. SLDN, THIRD ANNUAL REPORT, supra note 9, at 21-22.


12. See generally SLDN, THIRD ANNUAL REPORT, supra note 9, at 3 (detailing various ways in which the implementation of the policy “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” was used to initiate witch hunts, to harass, and to discharge involuntarily gay and lesbian servicemembers).
toll on women, both lesbian and heterosexual, because it can and has been used as a threat to prevent women from reporting sexual harassment.\textsuperscript{13} Women who report sexual harassment or sexual abuse have all too often been accused of being lesbian.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, these women find investigations initiated against them after reporting unwanted conduct instead of against their harassers or abusers.\textsuperscript{15} Lesbian baiting is a powerful tool to keep women “in their place,” not just in the military, but in other societal contexts as well.\textsuperscript{16}

This Comment evaluates how the military uses the policy “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” to keep female servicemembers silent when they are sexually abused, harassed, or threatened with sexual abuse or harassment by fellow servicemembers.\textsuperscript{17} The military has also used, and continues to use, the policy of discharging female servicemembers when they accomplish non-traditional successes, such as earning an elite position in a field where women are not traditionally successful, or even present. Part I evaluates the policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” to determine how the policy is implemented, and how this implementation contributes to the problem of lesbian baiting in the military. Part II discusses the particulars of lesbian baiting itself, and how the military uses lesbian baiting to keep women in a subservient position in the United States military. Part III examines the recent allegations of sexual harassment in the military and attempts to determine what kind of impact lesbian baiting had on the decisions that female accusers make. Part III also discusses lesbian baiting of women who work in non-traditional fields in the military. Part IV recommends that

\textsuperscript{13} See SLDN, Third Annual Report, supra note 9, at 21-25 (detailing reports of female servicemembers who have reported sexual harassment to their commanding officers, only to find themselves the subject of an investigation into alleged homosexual conduct).

\textsuperscript{14} See SLDN, Third Annual Report, supra note 9, at 22 (finding that commanders too often respond to allegations of sexual harassment by investigating women under the guise of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue”).

\textsuperscript{15} SLDN, Third Annual Report, supra note 9, at 22.

\textsuperscript{16} See Suzanne Pharr, Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism 19, 20 (1988) (asserting that lesbian baiting is an insidious method of oppressing women by combining sexism and homophobia to keep women in gender roles when they try to resist the status quo).

\textsuperscript{17} Servicemembers Legal Defense Network finds that lesbian baiting is a powerful threat to women in the military. It stated:

[t]oo often, commanders respond to [speculation and rumors that female servicemembers are lesbian] by investigating the women under the guise of enforcing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue,” rather than disciplining men who start such rumors or who perpetrate sexual abuse. As a result, many women do not report sexual harassment or assault out of fear that they will be accused as lesbian, investigated and discharged. Other women report that they give in to sexual demands specifically to avoid being rumored to be a lesbian.

SLDN, Third Annual Report, supra note 9, at 22.
women must be kept safe from lesbian baiting in the military. The Comment concludes that the military itself, and not solely female servicemembers, would benefit from the eradication of lesbian baiting in the military.

I. "DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL, DON'T PURSUE"

Even before it became law, the political compromise that became the policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue,” was not viewed as much of an improvement upon its predecessor. Its colloquial name is a misnomer; gay, lesbian and bisexual servicemembers are regularly asked, pursued and harassed under the “new” law. They are harassed at a rate comparable to the pre-1993 policy, which explicitly relegated gays, lesbians and bisexuals to a role “incompatible” with military service.

19. See Little Change Seen in New Gay Policy, SACRAMENTO BEE, July 23, 1993, at A21 (reporting that the new regulations largely embody the then-current rules); Peter Grier, Clinton's Policy on Gays in Miliitary Leaves Many Questions, GRAY ARES IN PRACTICE, COMMANDERS IN THE FIELD WILL DETERMINE WHAT THE NEW POLICY MEANS TO THOSE IN THE SERVICE, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, July 23, 1993, at 1 (reporting that commanders will implement the policy “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” with very little guidance); Mark Thompson, Clinton's Policy on Gays Causes Confusion, ANGER, L.A. DAILY NEWS, July 25, 1993, at N1 (reporting that even President Clinton did not seem to understand the new regulations after the Secretary of Defense had to correct the President when he declared that under this policy servicepersons could not pronounce themselves as being gay).
20. Congress' findings regarding the policy concerning homosexuality in the Armed Forces include:

13. The prohibition against homosexual conduct is a long-standing element of military law that continues to be necessary in the unique circumstances of military service.
14. The armed forces must maintain personnel policies that exclude persons whose presence in the armed forces would create an unacceptable risk to the armed forces' high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability.
15. The presence in the armed forces of persons who demonstrate a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order, and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability.

21. In fiscal year 1996, the Department of Defense discharged 850 servicemembers under “Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue,” which was a “fiveyear high, and the highest rate of discharge since 1987.” SLDN, THIRD ANNUAL REPORT, supra note 9, at i. In 1997, the military discharged 997 servicemembers under the policy “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” which was a 67% increase over discharges in 1994, the first full year that the policy was in effect. Tim Weiner, Military Discharge of Homosexuals Soar; Rise of 67% Since the “Don't Ask, Don’t Tell” Policy Was Created, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 7, 1998, at A24.

[h]omosexuality is incompatible with military service. The presence in the military environment of persons who engage in homosexual conduct or who, by their statements, demonstrate a propensity to engage in homosexual conduct, seriously impairs the accomplishment of the military mission. The presence of such members