



Service Women's Action Network (SWAN)  
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Senator Carl Levin  
Chairman  
Senate Armed Services Committee  
228 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Senator John McCain  
Ranking Member  
Senate Armed Service Committee  
228 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Representative Ike Skelton  
Chairman  
House Armed Services Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

Representative Buck McKeon  
Ranking Member  
House Armed Services Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

**Support Repeal of the Ban on Private Funding of Abortion  
in the FY 2011 National Defense Authorization Act**

Dear Sirs:

The Service Women's Action Network is an organization dedicated to serving the needs of military women and veterans, and we were pleased to see that the Senate Armed Services Committee recently adopted the amendment, offered by Senator Burris (D-IL), that would ensure that all U.S. servicewomen and military dependents, regardless of where they are stationed, have access to comprehensive reproductive health care. We write today to urge you to support the amendment and repeal the ban on private funding of abortion on military bases overseas.

Current law bans almost all abortion services at U.S. military hospitals and medical facilities – even if a woman pays for the procedure with her own private funds. Nor is there an exception for cases where a woman's health is at risk. The Burris amendment would not require the Department of Defense to pay for abortion services. Rather, it would simply repeal the dangerous ban on privately funded abortion care and allow U.S. servicewomen to use their own private dollars to obtain abortion services at U.S. military facilities.

The current ban compromises the health and safety of American servicewomen. The ban's impact is particularly devastating for service members, spouses and dependents stationed overseas. Currently, tens of thousands of women live on military bases overseas and rely on military hospitals for access to health care. These women are forced either to attempt to obtain an abortion in a local medical facility in the country in which they are stationed, or to travel to a medical facility in the United States or in another country.

In countries where abortion is legal, in practice, servicewomen frequently do not have access to legal abortions for a number of reasons, including: local health facilities are inadequate, unsafe, or lack trained medical personnel; U.S. military bases may be located in remote areas without access to local medical facilities; and U.S. military personnel may be serving in an area with active hostilities.

Servicewomen are therefore often forced to travel to obtain abortion care, requiring them to take leave from their military duty. Servicewomen must clear the leave time with their superiors, requiring them to disclose information about private medical decisions. The superior may delay or refuse to grant a woman leave, although each week of delay increases the potential risk to the woman's health. In war zones, leave may not be available, resulting in servicewomen being transferred to another base. Losing personnel while operationally deployed has a direct impact on the ability of the unit to complete its mission and there is much research to show that replacing members of a military unit during wartime has a detrimental effect on unit cohesion. Both of these present a greater threat to mission accomplishment than removing the abortion ban. The ban can also cause unfair harm to a service member's career by reducing the length of their combat tours, which the military views as crucial experience in the overall development of their leadership and is the type of experience the military looks for when considering personnel for future promotion and assignment choices.

Finally, given the alarmingly high incidence of military sexual trauma, which includes rape, servicewomen deserve access to comprehensive reproductive health care. The facts are sobering and unsettling: while 1 in 6 civilian women experience sexual assault, for military women this number climbs to approximately 1 in 3.<sup>1</sup> Sexual assaults that occur in the military are often not isolated incidents and may involve more than one perpetrator – 37% of women veterans report being raped at least twice, and 14% report experiences of gang rape.<sup>2</sup>

Although servicewomen can purportedly obtain an abortion on base *if they report the rape*, this exception is meaningless more often than not. The dynamics of rape and sexual assault that occur in the military are different than in civilian life. Perpetrators of military sexual trauma often wield control over the victim, especially since perpetrators are likely to outrank the victims. If the perpetrators are in the victims' chain of command, reporting the incident can seem impossible. Victims are often at risk of retaliation by perpetrators, and commanders often fail to enforce the protection of those who report sexual trauma. Commanders and fellow servicemembers may blame the victim for ruining a "good soldier's reputation" Moreover, servicemembers have the compounded fear of losing their jobs or ruining their reputations as a result of reporting sexual assaults. It is thus not surprising that experiences of military trauma are widely under-reported. Among a sample of servicewomen raped in the military, an alarming 75% did not report the incident.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sadler et al. 2003, "Factors Associated with Women's Risk of Rape in the Military Environment." American Journal of Industrial Medicine 43:262-273.

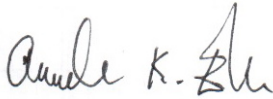
<sup>2</sup> Id.

<sup>3</sup> Id.

The consequences of military sexual trauma are severe. It is associated with a range of negative health outcomes including post traumatic stress disorder and depression. Congress should not compound the harm that service women experience by denying them safe access, should they need it, to the full range of reproductive health care.

For all of these reasons, the ban on privately funded abortions should be repealed. We urge you to support the repeal and the health and safety of our military women.

Sincerely,



Anuradha K. Bhagwati, MPP  
Executive Director  
Service Women's Action Network

cc: Members of the House and Senate Armed Services Committee  
Speaker Nancy Pelosi  
Representative James Clyburn  
Minority Leader John Boehner  
Majority Leader Harry Reid  
Minority Leader Mitch McConnell