

Opinion | Why every federal agency needs independent ombudsman on sexual assault

By **Ting Cui** and **Robert Weiner**

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Few federal employees report their sexual harassers to management and even fewer believe their harasser will receive punishment. (AndreyPopov/Getty Images)

Despite being the largest law enforcement entity in the U.S. government, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has the lowest share of female officers, standing at a mere 9.8 percent of the [agency](#). Federal agent Emiljana Kodra filed a lawsuit against DHS this year, accusing them of neglecting to shield her from sexual misconduct by her supervisor. After rejecting his advances, Kodra was relocated to an unfavorable post. DHS responded to her complaint by promising to hire more women

According to a [2021 Merit Systems Protection Board survey](#), 17% of female federal civil servants reported sexual harassment. This figure soared to 26% among women in offices with a predominantly male workforce. The few women who dare to report assault face possible consequences from their superiors, inadequate responses, or disbelief.

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Outside of U.S. agencies, statistics from the CDC indicate that one out of every three women and one out of every six men will experience sexual assault in their lifetime. Moreover, the absence of independent oversight mechanisms exposes victims to further harm and manipulation, perpetuating a culture of silence. A report from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission found that 90% of harassment victims chose not to pursue formal action.

While the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) at the Department of Defense represents a step forward in addressing the issue within government agencies, it appears to lack the independence and impartiality needed to thoroughly assess cases. SAPRO is insufficient.

Federal agencies must establish independent ombudsmen within each department to advocate for victims, providing vital support and guidance during reporting and investigations. These ombudsmen should possess the same autonomy and authority as special prosecutors or attorneys general to carry out their duties without fear of interference or prejudice. Furthermore, a centralized ombudsman office within the White House is essential for coordinating victim outreach and standardizing procedures for seeking justice across agencies.

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Senators [Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and Chuck Grassley's](#), R-Iowa, proposed Military Justice Improvement Act from 2021 offers a model for how independent oversight should be addressed across various sectors. The Act aims to shift decision-making authority for serious crimes like sexual assault from the chain of command to independent, trained military prosecutors. This change addresses the systemic fear experienced by survivors of sexual assault when contemplating whether to report crimes.

Certainly, it is hypocritical for the U.S. to enact new laws and legal measures addressing sexual misconduct in other contexts while evading accountability for wrongdoing in its own agencies.

President Joe Biden's potential support for such initiatives that address sexual violence comprehensively is shown by his endorsement of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). As he [remarked](#) in the reauthorization of VAWA, "The fact is that it really wasn't so long ago this country didn't want to talk about violence against women, let alone as being a national epidemic, something the government had to address." Indeed, it is time for the government to take decisive action and establish oversight in federal agencies.

Similar to how Congress first enacted the Anti-Mandatory Retirement Bill, ending forced retirement for federal employees before extending it nationwide, establishing an ombudsperson in each federal agency could pave the way for similar initiatives in the private sector.

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There is a pressing need for sweeping actions to safeguard federal employees from sexual misconduct, preserving the integrity of our government institutions.

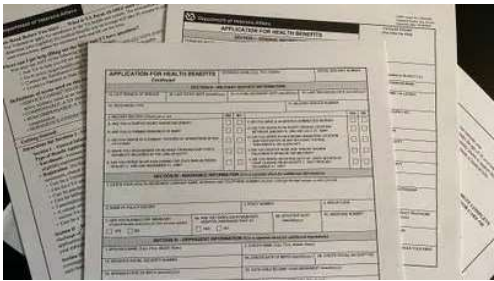
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