

March 30, 2009

LETTER

Rape and the Military

To the Editor:

Re “The Great Shame,” by Bob Herbert (column, March 21):

Violence against servicewomen will continue to exist so long as sexual assault is treated as an internal military matter.

As it did in the aftermath of the Tailhook and Aberdeen Proving Ground scandals, Congress has lately renewed its demand that the military improve the manner in which it polices itself. But why should the military be trusted to police itself at all?

Under military policy, the disposition of harassment and assault cases is left entirely to the discretion of unit commanders, who alone decide on the need for corrective action. Since service members are exempt from civilian workplace harassment laws, the military is shielded from precisely the sort of outside judicial review that could act as a real deterrent.

This lawlessness has fostered a culture of underprosecution in which only 38 percent of substantiated rape cases even go to trial.

Surely these numbers prove that it's time to stop trusting the fox to protect the henhouse.

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New York, March 21, 2009

The writers are, respectively, the director of the Veterans and Servicemembers Project at Urban Justice Center, and the co-founders of Claiming Justice.