

Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation  
Committee

## Inquiry into the Defence Amendment (Sexual Assault Prevention, Intervention and Response Commission) Bill 2025

Professor Ben Wadham  
Professor in Defence and Veteran Studies  
Open Door: Improving the Wellbeing of Veterans, Public Safety Personnel and their Families,  
Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia  
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## Executive Summary

This submission examines the Defence Amendment (Sexual Assault Prevention, Intervention, and Response Commission) Bill 2025 from the perspective of four decades of research into military institutional abuse, gender relations, and organisational reform within the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Our research, which includes extensive analysis of over 35 inquiries conducted since 1970 and interviews with around 300 former members, demonstrates that military sexual violence is not an isolated incident but a pervasive issue within military institutions. The establishment of the Sexual Assault Prevention, Intervention and Response Commission (SAPIRC) represents a necessary step towards rectifying systemic failures in the ADF's response to sexual violence.

The Bill's provisions for independent monitoring, obligatory reporting, and victim-survivor support channels are essential advances. Nevertheless, the Commission's effectiveness will lie in its actual independence from Defence, proper finance, and integration with broader cultural changes that address the generative mechanisms of military institutional abuse: martial masculinity, tribalism, and military exceptionalism.

This submission recommends:

- strengthening the Bill's provisions regarding Commission independence,
- expanding its mandate, or logically recognising institutional abuse, as the context within which military violence occurs and
- ensuring robust accountability mechanisms that cannot be evaded by command discretion or institutional defensiveness.

## Introduction

I write as a researcher who has dedicated nearly three decades to analysing violence within military institutions. I am also a veteran who experienced these issues as an infantry soldier and military police investigator. My work has documented patterns of military institutional abuse, including sexual assault, hazing, bastardisation, and administrative violence, across five decades of ADF service. Through analysis of institutional reviews, archival research, and direct testimony from survivors, I have traced how masculine martial culture generates and sustains violence within the ranks and how organisational responses consistently prioritise institutional protection over member welfare [1], [2], and [3].

The Defence Amendment (Sexual Assault Prevention, Intervention and Response Commission) Bill 2025 stems from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide's findings on systemic failures in tackling sexual assault. While this bill represents significant progress, the Committee must recognise that sexual violence in the ADF cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader issue of military institutional abuse. Sexual assault is one element of a deeply rooted culture that promotes violence, maintains strict hierarchies, and punishes vulnerability or deviation from male martial standards [4][5].

Our research demonstrates three critical points relevant to this inquiry:

1. First, military sexual violence is systemic and institutional, not only interpersonal. It originates from organisational systems, hierarchy, command and discretion, and tribalism that create circumstances for abuse while suppressing victims.
2. Second, despite approximately 35 inquiries into military culture, military justice, and misconduct since 1970, substantive reform has consistently failed because the ADF has been permitted to self-regulate, focusing on procedural changes while leaving underlying cultural mechanisms intact.
3. Third, true external oversight with statutory powers that command discretion cannot overrule is crucial for effective reform. The SAPIRC Bill moves in this direction but requires strengthening to fulfil its potential.

## Understanding Military Institutional Abuse: The Context for Sexual Violence

### The Problem

I use the term "military institutional abuse" to encompass all forms of violence within military ranks: sexual assault, sexual harassment, physical assault, hazing, bastardisation, and administrative violence (the misuse of command discretion to harass, disadvantage, or terminate members) [6]. This framework is essential for understanding sexual violence in the ADF because these forms of abuse share common generative mechanisms.

Sexual violence in military contexts differs from civilian sexual violence in important ways. It occurs within a total institution marked by hierarchy, regimentation, command and control, and the martial imperative – the preparation and capacity to prosecute violence [7]. Military socialisation deliberately creates strong boundaries between self and other, "us and them", as a necessary foundation for combat effectiveness. However, this tribalism becomes dysfunctional when directed inward, generating discrimination, harassment, and violence against those deemed unworthy or different within the ranks [8].

### The Gendered Character of Military Violence

Military institutions are fundamentally masculinised organisations. The professional military was founded during the Enlightenment period, when ideas of citizenship, equality, and fraternity emerged, but, as Carol Pateman argues, fraternity has been neglected in democratic theory despite being foundational to social contracts [9]. In military contexts, fraternity finds its most complete expression, creating bonds of brotherhood that simultaneously provide unit cohesion and exclude or victimise others.

Our research identifies "martial masculinity" as a hegemonic form of masculinity that dominates military culture [10]. Martial masculinity is characterised by:

- Aggressive, controlling, and authoritarian practices
- Stigmatisation of vulnerability and emotional expression
- Hierarchical relations that subordinate other forms of masculinity and femininity

- Performance through violence - both external (tactical dominance) and internal (maintaining masculine norms)
- Obsession with wholeness and singularity, denying diversity and alterity

Women entering the ADF from the mid-1980s exposed these masculine cultures. The 1992 HMAS Swan sexual harassment scandal, the 1998 ADFA review, and subsequent incidents revealed how men's cultures aboard vessels and in units had long operated with impunity [11]. But military sexual violence is not only directed at women. Men experience assault, predominantly through hazing and initiation rituals, where penetration – literal and symbolic – functions as a mechanism for creating martial subjects [12]. The intensity and perversity of military hazing distinguish it from civilian contexts, marking military institutional abuse as a distinct phenomenon requiring specialised understanding and response.

### The Persistence of Military Institutional Abuse

The chronology of inquiries since 1970 reveals a disturbing pattern: despite repeated exposure to abuse, substantive cultural change remains elusive [13]. The 1970 Fox Report into bastardisation at Royal Military College Duntroon reported severe kinds of hectoring, physical indignities, face slapping, caning, and even pricking cadets' initials into their buttocks with swords [14]. Fox proposed removing fourth-class training and decreasing the martial imperative at RMC. Yet these practices continued, spreading to the Australian Defence Force Academy when it opened in 1986.

The 1998 Grey Report investigating ADFA reported "a high level of unacceptable sexual behaviour" that had "become a pervasive and public feature of the environment" [15]. It portrayed a "rot virus" taking decent young people and ruining their discernment and morals. Despite urging the termination of fourth-class training, resistance continued. A version was even reestablished at ADFA in 2020, illustrating that without ongoing external inspection, militaries resort to exclusionary and aggressive tactics.

Recent data confirms the problem's scale: Defence's own figures show nearly 800 sexual assaults reported in the ADF over the past five years, with an estimated 60% underreporting rate [16]. Our research with 113 abuse interview participants found that 41 reported suicidal ideation

and 22 attempted suicides, with military institutional abuse, including sexual assault, being a primary causal factor [17]. For many survivors, institutional betrayal, the failure of the ADF to protect them and the punishment they faced for reporting were as traumatic as the assault itself.

## Critical Analysis of the Bill

### Strengths of the Proposed Commission

The Defence Amendment (Sexual Assault Prevention, Intervention and Response Commission) Bill 2025 incorporates several essential elements:

- **Independent statutory authority:** Establishing SAPIRC as a statutory agency beyond Defence's direct control tackles the underlying problem of self-regulation. Our research reveals that internal ADF reviews frequently prioritise institutional protection over member welfare, leading to victim-blaming, suppression of complaints, and retaliation against individuals who report [18].
- **Prevention, intervention, and response framework:** The Bill's three-pillar approach recognises that sexual violence requires more than reactive investigation. Prevention through culture change, intervention through support systems, and response through investigation and responsibility are all critical components.
- **Victim-survivor-centred approach:** Provisions for forensic examination, legal support, and 24/7 advocacy services address critical gaps identified in our research, where survivors faced inadequate support, disbelief, and secondary trauma through complaint processes [19].
- **Data gathering and reporting:** Systematic data collecting with public reporting will give transparency and accountability measures that have been absent. The Royal Commission found Defence lacked reliable, comprehensive datasets for military sexual misconduct and could not quantify prevalence or monitor intervention effectiveness [20].

- **Mandatory training and reporting pathways:** Clear reporting pathways (limited and unrestricted) plus mandatory training for all personnel establish an infrastructure for cultural change. However, training alone has been insufficient in earlier reform initiatives.

## Critical Weaknesses and Areas Requiring Amendment

Despite these strengths, the Bill requires significant amendments to ensure SAPIRC's effectiveness:

### 1. Independence and Institutional Capture

The Bill designates SAPIRC as a legislative authority, although the relationship with Defence Command and the Minister necessitates explanation. Our research on military justice system reform efforts (1995-2011) demonstrates how command influence persistently undermines independence [21]. Commanders have exercised discretion to alter reports, coerce witnesses, and shield criminals while penalising victims.

**Recommendation 1:** *The Bill should explicitly prohibit Defence personnel, including the Chief of Defence Force and Service Chiefs, from directing or influencing Commission investigations, findings, or recommendations.*

**Recommendation 2:** *The Commissioner should report directly to Parliament, not through the Minister for Defence.*

**Recommendation 3:** *Consideration should be given to excluding Commission staff from Defence, and it should not include serving or recently separated Defence personnel in investigative or decision-making roles. This prevents cultural capture and conflicts of interest.*

### 2. Scope Limited to Sexual Violence

The Bill exclusively addresses sexual assault and associated charges. This artificial distinction, albeit comprehensible due to the Royal Commission's emphasis, sustains a basic

misapprehension of military institutional abuse. Sexual violence does not occur in isolation, it is interwoven with hazing, physical assault, administrative violence, and cultures of tribalism [22].

Our research indicates that service personnel subjected to various forms of abuse encounter compounded trauma and an increased risk of suicide. Women assaulted in the context of broader harassment and exclusion; men assaulted during initiation rituals that include physical violence; transgender and LGBTQI members facing discrimination, harassment, and assault—all exist within the same toxic cultural ecosystem [23].

**Recommendation 4:** *Consider expanding the Commission's mandate to address all forms of military institutional abuse, or at a minimum, sexual assault occurring in contexts of broader harassment, discrimination, and abuse.*

**Recommendation 5:** *The Commission should have the authority to investigate systemic cultural issues that create conditions for sexual violence.*

### 3. Command Discretion and Administrative Violence

The Bill does not adequately address the problem of administrative violence – the misuse of command discretion to retaliate against complainants or protect perpetrators. Our research identified administrative violence as particularly damaging, leading to experiences of institutional betrayal that contribute to suicidal ideation [24].

Service members who reported sexual assault or harassment frequently faced:

- Involuntary posting or discharge
- Negative performance reviews
- Loss of career progression opportunities
- Psychiatric assessments are used as weapons to discredit them.
- Denial of medical support or claims
- Further harassment sanctioned by command

**Recommendation 6:** *The Bill should include explicit protections against retaliation and administrative violence towards complainants, witnesses, and advocates.*

**Recommendation 7:** *The Commission should have the authority to investigate misuse of command discretion related to sexual violence complaints and recommend sanctions against commanders who enable, ignore, or retaliate against reporting.*

**Recommendation 8:** *Implement automatic, independent oversight of all administrative actions (posting, discharge, performance evaluation, medical assessment) affecting members who have made sexual assault complaints within the preceding two years.*

#### 4. Integration with the Military Justice System

The Bill establishes investigative functions, but the relationship with military justice processes requires clarification. Our research on military justice reform (encompassing five major inquiries between 1995 and 2005) demonstrates persistent problems with the effectiveness of the military justice system, particularly commander influence over prosecutions and disciplinary outcomes [25].

**Recommendation 9:** *The Bill should specify that the Commission has authority to review military justice handling of sexual assault cases, including decisions not to prosecute, plea bargaining, sentencing, and punishment administration. The Commission should report publicly on military justice outcomes in sexual assault cases.*

**Recommendation 10:** *Sexual assault prosecutions should be removed from the summary jurisdiction of commanding officers and handled exclusively by courts-martial with independent prosecution and judicial officers.*

**Recommendation 11:** *The Bill should require legislative reforms to the Defence Force Discipline Act 1982 to implement this change.*

#### 5. Restorative Justice and Reparation

The Bill appropriately focuses on prevention and accountability but does not adequately address survivors' needs for acknowledgement, apology, and reparation. Our research found that reparation processes, while beneficial for some, created further trauma for others [26]. Many survivors experienced the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce's (DART) process as

retraumatising, involving requirements to provide detailed evidence of assaults that were never documented, interrogation of their accounts, and inadequate recognition of institutional failures.

**Recommendation 12:** *The Bill should establish a restorative justice framework within SAPIRC that offers survivors multiple pathways to acknowledgement and reparation, including a formal apology, compensation, expungement of adverse records linked to abuse, and access to specialised therapeutic support.*

## 6. Training and Cultural Reform

The mandatory training measures in the Bill are essential yet inadequate. Examination of previous reform efforts reveals that training centred on policy adherence and definitions of sexual assault has been ineffective in engendering cultural transformation. [27]. The ADF's "Beyond Compliance" report (2011) recognised that the organisation's tendency to respond with procedural changes rather than cultural transformation has limited the effectiveness of reform [28].

**Recommendation 13:** *The Bill should require SAPIRC to develop and oversee the implementation of evidence-based prevention programs that address the core issues of military institutional abuse: martial masculinities, tribalism, and hierarchy. This includes:*

- *Gender relations education focusing on how military/martial masculinities create conditions for violence*
- *Leadership training emphasising ethical use of command discretion*
- *Bystander intervention programs with peer-to-peer training*
- *Continuous monitoring of training effectiveness through climate surveys and incident data*

**Recommendation 14:** *Establish training institutions (RMC Duntroon, ADFA, and training establishments) as priority focus areas for Commission oversight. Our research identifies these as high-risk environments for military institutional abuse [29].*

## 7. Accountability for Leadership Failure

The Bill focuses appropriately on accountability for perpetrators but inadequately addresses accountability for commanders and senior leaders who enable abuse through inaction, suppression of complaints, or creation of toxic cultures. Our research indicates that the behaviours of unit commanders to reporting significantly influence whether members receive support or endure more suffering. [30].

**Recommendation 15:** *The Bill must stipulate that commanders who inadequately address sexual assault accusations, foster environments that condone abuse, or retaliate against complainants are subject to obligatory enquiry by the Commission and may face criminal or administrative penalties.*

**Recommendation 16:** *Command performance evaluations must encompass an analysis of the prevalence of sexual violence inside the unit and the efficacy of the response measures.*

**Recommendation 17:** *Develop a public database, overseen by SAPIRC, cataloguing units with a high incidence of sexual violence allegations. This should guide targeted interventions and ensure accountability measures.*

### Addressing the Committee's Focus: Ensuring the Bill Best Supports Victim-Survivors

The Committee's terms of reference emphasise scrutinising provisions to ensure the Bill best supports victim-survivors. Based on our research with survivors of military institutional abuse, I identify the following priorities:

#### *1. Genuine Safety from Retaliation*

Survivors consistently described the fear of vengeance as the principal obstacle to reporting [31]. Retaliation manifests in various ways: direct harassment from offenders and their allies; social exclusion within groups; detrimental career actions by leadership; psychiatric labelling to undermine grievances; and involuntary discharge.

**Recommendation 18:** *The Bill must incorporate enhanced whistleblower protections for complainants, extending beyond the complaint period to encompass the whole*

*tenure of members who report and their ongoing civilian employment in Defence-related sectors. Sanctions for retaliations ought to be stringent and disclosed to the public.*

### *2. Control and Choice in Process*

Survivors endured trauma from situations in which they had little agency: being compelled to give many detailed statements; having their grievances examined without their agreement; confronting their offenders in proximity; and having results decided without their involvement [32].

**Recommendation 19:** *The Bill must guarantee that survivors have optimal control over the management of their complaints, including a legitimate option between restricted reporting (support without investigation) and unrestricted reporting (support with investigation). Survivors need to participate in investigative procedures and be consistently updated on advancements and results.*

### *3. Belief and Validation*

A dominant theme in survivor accounts is disbelief - from peers, commanders, investigators, and medical personnel. Women reporting rape were told they had "personality disorders"; men reporting assault were told they were "weak" or "attention-seeking"; survivors were blamed for their victimisation [33].

**Recommendation 20:** *The Bill must mandate trauma-informed, victim-centred training for all Commission staff and ADF personnel who engage with survivors. A presumption of belief ought to inform the provision of support, even as investigations uphold requisite standards of evidence.*

### *4. Holistic Support*

Survivors' needs extend beyond immediate crisis response to long-term therapeutic support, career counselling, transition assistance, and family support. Numerous survivors in our study encountered relationship breakdown, work challenges, housing instability, and a decline in mental health persisting for years following the assaults. [34] [35].

**Recommendation 21:** *The Bill must ensure SAPIRC can refer survivors to comprehensive support services and monitor that support is provided. Support should extend beyond service separation and be integrated with Department of Veterans' Affairs services.*

#### 5. Justice and Accountability

Survivors want perpetrators held accountable and institutional failures acknowledged. The most traumatic experiences were not only the assaults but also the institutional betrayal, the organisation's failure to protect them and its punishment of them for speaking out [36].

**Recommendation 22:** *The Bill must guarantee that the Commission possesses genuine authority to mandate investigations, propose prosecutions, and publicly disclose results. Survivors must recognise that reporting results in accountability rather than impunity.*

**Recommendation 23:** *The Bill must require that the Commission provide comprehensive, public annual reporting on prevalence, investigations, and outcomes.*

#### 6. Cultural Change, Not Just Individual Justice

Many survivors expressed that their primary motivation for reporting was preventing others from experiencing similar abuse. They wanted systemic change, not just individual justice [37].

**Recommendation 24:** *The Bill must empower SAPIRC to drive cultural reform, not merely respond to individual complaints. The Commission should identify systemic risk factors, high-risk units and leaders and patterns requiring organisational intervention.*

#### Lessons from Failed Reform

The Committee should understand that the SAPIRC Bill represents the latest in a 50-year history of reform attempts. My audit of approximately 35 previous inquiries addressing military culture, military justice, gender reform, and military institutional abuse reveal a consistent pattern of failure [38]:

Year	Key Inquiry/Event
1970	Fox Report (RMC bastardisation) – recommended eradicating fourth-class training
1987	First reports of sexual harassment following women's integration
1992	HMAS Swan scandal – first major public sexual harassment case
1994	Senate Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in ADF
1998	Grey Report (ADFA) – found "high level of unacceptable sexual behaviour"
2001	Burchett Report – major military justice system review
2005	Senate Inquiry into the effectiveness of the military justice system
2011	Beyond Compliance report - identified tribalism as dysfunctional.
2011	DLA Piper Review – documented decades of abuse, including rape, sodomy
2011	Skype scandal – triggered multiple reviews
2012-17	Pathway to Change reform program
2021	Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) found Pathway to Change failed to achieve promised reforms.
2024	Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide Final Report

**Table 1: Selected inquiries into military culture and misconduct, 1970-2024**

This history reveals why the SAPIRC Bill's independent oversight is essential. Internal ADF reform consistently fails because:

- Military exceptionalism: The civil-military separation, while protecting against military interference in democratic politics, creates unintended consequences. The ADF develops an institutional culture seeing itself as exceptional, superior to civilian norms,

- and resistant to external influences. This generates defensiveness, codes of silence, and reluctance to acknowledge failures [39].
- Procedural focus: The ADF's response to scandals emphasises procedural changes, new policies, revised definitions, and updated training modules rather than cultural transformation. This allows the organisation to claim action while the fundamental culture remains unchanged [40].
  - Command resistance: Commanders, particularly those in combat arms roles, resist reforms perceived as undermining tactical effectiveness. Gender integration, restrictions on hazing, and external oversight are framed as civilian interference threatening military capability [41].
  - Inadequate accountability: Without external enforcement, recommendations are partially implemented, watered down, or ignored. The 2021 Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) audit of Defence's cultural reform implementation found that the promised reforms had not been achieved [42].

The SAPIRC Bill offers an opportunity to break this cycle through genuine external oversight with statutory powers. However, the Bill's effectiveness depends on resisting pressure to water down independence, scope, or powers during parliamentary consideration or implementation.

### International Comparisons: Learning from Allied Nations

Australia is not alone in confronting military sexual violence. Allied nations have implemented reforms offering lessons for strengthening the SAPIRC Bill:

- Canada: The 2015 Deschamps Report identified "an underlying sexualized culture in the CAF that is antagonistic towards women and LGBTQ members and facilitates more severe occurrences of sexual harassment and assault." [43] Canada established an autonomous Sexual Misconduct Response Centre (SMRC) outside the line of command. Subsequent evaluations revealed that, in the absence of sufficient authority to enforce change, cultural transformation was constrained.
- United States: Despite comprehensive legislative improvements, including stipulations in the National Defence Authorisation Acts limiting commander discretion in sexual

assault cases, prevalence remains elevated. The essential lesson is that modifications to military justice structures must be paired with cultural reforms that tackle masculinity and unit cultures [44].

- United Kingdom: Recent allegations indicate ongoing sexual violence, encompassing rape and abuse during initiation rituals. The 2021 Defence Committee enquiry revealed that "the accounts we received depict a challenging scenario for women in the military," encompassing "serious sexual assault and rape" [45]. Like Australia, the UK grapples with the conflict between military self-regulation and efficient oversight.

These international experiences demonstrate that:

- Independent oversight bodies require robust statutory powers and adequate resourcing.
- Structural reforms must address command discretion over prosecutions.
- Cultural change requires confronting masculine military cultures, not just improving policies.
- Sustained external pressure and oversight are necessary as militaries will not self-reform.

## Recommendations Summary

Based on the analysis above, I recommend the following amendments to strengthen the Bill:

### Independence and Governance:

**Recommendation 1:** *The Bill should explicitly prohibit Defence personnel, including the Chief of Defence Force and Service Chiefs, from directing or influencing Commission investigations, findings, or recommendations.*

**Recommendation 2:** *The Commissioner should report directly to Parliament, not through the Minister for Defence.*

**Recommendation 3:** *Commission staff should be recruited from outside Defence and should not include serving or recently separated Defence personnel in investigative or decision-making roles. This prevents cultural capture and conflicts of interest.*

Scope and Mandate:

**Recommendation 4:** *Expand the Commission's mandate to address all forms of military institutional abuse, or at a minimum, sexual assault occurring in contexts of broader harassment, discrimination, and abuse.*

**Recommendation 5:** *The Commission should have the authority to investigate systemic cultural issues that create conditions for sexual violence.*

Protection from Retaliation:

**Recommendation 6:** *The Bill should include explicit protections against retaliation and administrative violence towards complainants, witnesses, and advocates.*

**Recommendation 7:** *The Commission should have the authority to investigate misuse of command discretion related to sexual violence complaints and recommend sanctions against commanders who enable, ignore, or retaliate against reporting.*

**Recommendation 8:** *Implement automatic, independent oversight of all administrative actions (posting, discharge, performance evaluation, medical assessment) affecting members who have made sexual assault complaints within the preceding two years.*

Military Justice Integration:

**Recommendation 9:** *The Bill should specify that the Commission has authority to review military justice handling of sexual assault cases, including decisions not to prosecute, plea bargaining, sentencing, and punishment administration. The Commission should report publicly on military justice outcomes in sexual assault cases.*

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**Recommendation 11:** *The Bill should require legislative reforms to the Defence Force Discipline Act 1982 to implement this change.*

#### Restorative Justice:

**Recommendation 12:** *The Bill should establish a restorative justice framework within SAPIRC that offers survivors multiple pathways to acknowledgement and reparation, including a formal apology, compensation, expungement of adverse records linked to abuse, and access to specialised therapeutic support.*

#### Training and Cultural Reform:

**Recommendation 13:** *The Bill should mandate SAPIRC to formulate and supervise the execution of evidence-based prevention programmes targeting the underlying processes of military institutional abuse: martial masculinities, tribalism, and hierarchy. This includes:*

- *Gender relations education focusing on how military/martial masculinities create conditions for violence*
- *Leadership training emphasising ethical use of command discretion*
- *Bystander intervention programs with peer-to-peer training*
- *Continuous monitoring of training effectiveness through climate surveys and incident data*

**Recommendation 14:** *Establish training institutions (RMC Duntroon, ADFA, and training establishments) as priority focus areas for Commission oversight. Our research identifies these as high-risk environments for military institutional abuse.*

#### Leadership Accountability:

**Recommendation 15:** *The Bill must stipulate that commanders who inadequately address sexual assault accusations, foster environments that condone abuse, or retaliate against complainants are subject to obligatory enquiry by the Commission and may face criminal or administrative penalties.*

**Recommendation 16:** *Command performance evaluations must encompass an analysis of the prevalence of sexual violence inside the unit and the efficacy of the response measures.*

**Recommendation 17:** *Create a public database, overseen by SAPIRC, cataloguing units with elevated incidence of sexual violence allegations. This should guide focused interventions and enforce accountability measures.*

**Victim-Survivor Support:**

**Recommendation 18:** *The Bill must incorporate enhanced whistleblower protections for complainants, extending beyond the complaint period to encompass the whole tenure of members who report and their ongoing civilian employment in Defence-related sectors. Sanctions for retaliations ought to be stringent and disclosed to the public.*

**Recommendation 19:** *The Bill must guarantee that survivors have optimal control over the management of their complaints, including a legitimate option between restricted reporting (support without investigation) and unrestricted reporting (support with investigation). Survivors need to participate in investigative procedures and be consistently updated on advancements and results.*

**Recommendation 20:** *The Bill must mandate trauma-informed, victim-centred training for all Commission staff and ADF personnel who engage with survivors. A presumption of belief ought to inform the provision of support, even as investigations uphold requisite standards of evidence*

**Recommendation 21:** *The Bill must ensure SAPIRC can refer survivors to comprehensive support services and monitor that support is provided. Support should extend beyond service separation and be integrated with Department of Veterans' Affairs services.*

**Recommendation 22:** *The Bill must guarantee that the Commission possesses genuine authority to mandate investigations, propose prosecutions, and publicly disclose results. Survivors must recognise that reporting results in accountability rather than impunity.*

**Accountability**

**Recommendation 23:** *The Bill must require that the Commission provide comprehensive, public annual reporting on prevalence, investigations, and outcomes.*

**Recommendation 24:** *The Bill must empower SAPIRC to drive cultural reform, not merely respond to individual complaints. The Commission should identify systemic risk factors, high-risk units and leaders and patterns requiring organisational intervention.*

## Conclusion

The Defence Amendment (Sexual Assault Prevention, Intervention and Response Commission) Bill 2025 represents an important opportunity to address the devastating impact of sexual violence in the ADF. Nonetheless, its success hinges on comprehending this violence within the wider framework of military institutional abuse, a systematic issue entrenched in martial masculinities, tribalism, hierarchy, and military exceptionalism.

My forty years of advocacy and research, encompassing the examination of 35 prior investigations and interviews with 300 former personnel, reveal that sexual abuse is pervasive throughout military institutions. This is neither an anomaly or the result of a few ‘bad apples’ but rather a foreseeable consequence of organisational cultures that glorify violence, marginalise vulnerability, impose strict hierarchies, and oppose external oversight. Previous reform efforts have often failed due to the ADF’s allowance for self-regulation, which emphasises procedural adherence while neglecting the persistence of underlying cultural issues.

The SAPIRC Bill’s stipulations for independent oversight signify an essential shift from this ineffective approach. The Bill needs enhancement to guarantee authentic independence, sufficient breadth, formidable abilities to enforce change, and extensive support for victim-survivors. In the absence of these adjustments, there exists a significant risk that the Commission will become yet another project that promises transformation but yields only negligible enhancements.

The Committee confronts a pivotal decision: endorse a Bill that really enhances external supervision and accountability or permit the erosion of the Commission’s independence and authority due to pressure from Defence. The stakes could not be higher. As our research documents, military institutional abuse leads to profound trauma, relationship breakdown, employment difficulties, substance misuse, and suicide. Every day of delay is another day someone in Defence experiences assault without adequate support or justice.



Victim-survivors of military sexual violence have waited long enough. They deserve a Commission with the independence, powers, and mandate to drive genuine cultural transformation in the ADF. I urge the Committee to strengthen this Bill to deliver on that promise.

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