



27 February 2026

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the inquiry into the [Defence Amendment \(Sexual Assault Prevention, Intervention and Response Commission\) Bill 2025](#) (the Bill).

About Jesuit Social Services

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation. For almost 50 years we have been working with marginalised individuals and communities, delivering support services and advocating for improved policies, legislation and resources to achieve a just society where all people can reach their full potential. We are a national organisation with a significant footprint in Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory.

As part of our efforts to address gender-based violence, in 2017 we established The Men's Project to provide leadership and develop new approaches to reducing violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men, to keep families and communities safe, and to improve the wellbeing of people of all genders. Through The Men's Project, we deliver evidence-based primary prevention and early intervention programs that are informed by our practice experience, as well as our [Man Box](#) and [Adolescent Man Box](#) research focusing on attitudes to rigid gender norms and the behaviours of Australian men and boys.

Current priorities for The Men's Project include:

- building a greater understanding of men's violence and child sexual abuse, including opportunities for prevention and early intervention – drawing on our Man Box and Adolescent Man Box research and [child sexual abuse prevalence study](#);
- supporting people who work with men and boys every day (e.g. teachers, sports coaches, social workers) to prevent violence and improve the wellbeing of men and boys;
- developing new early intervention approaches with adolescents at risk of using violence;
- strengthening early intervention responses for adults and young people to prevent child sexual abuse; and
- advocating for systemic changes that seek to prevent violence and child sexual abuse – drawing on our grounded practice experience.

Response to the Bill

Jesuit Social Services supports the intent of the Bill to eliminate sexual assault in the Australian Defence Force, and recognises the importance of a strong government commitment to achieve this. Our submission does not examine the specific mechanisms for achieving this aim proposed in



the Bill. Rather, we draw on our research and practice experience to share insights into best practice approaches to preventing men's violence against women, children and trans and gender diverse people, including in male-dominated industries, which could inform the work of the proposed Sexual Assault Prevention, Intervention and Response Commission (SAPIR Commission).

Prevention of sexual violence must include challenging harmful gender norms

Sexual violence remains highly prevalent in Australian society. According to the 2021-22 Personal Safety Survey, more than one in five women (22%) and one in sixteen men (6.1%) has experienced sexual violence since the age of 18,¹ and recorded sexual assaults are increasing.² Females make up the vast majority of sexual assault victims.³ Prevalence of sexual violence within the Australian military also remains high, with Australian Defence Force (ADF) data showing that close to 800 sexual assaults were reported in the defence force over the five years to 2024, in the context of an estimated under-reporting rate of 60%.⁴

Gender inequality sets the context in which all forms of gendered violence, including sexual violence, occur.⁵ While they do not always result in violence, gendered norms, practices and structures in our relationships, communities, organisations and society provide the underlying social conditions that enable violence. Preventing sexual and other forms of gendered violence within the ADF must start, therefore, with addressing sex discrimination and promoting gender equality within the ADF.

Jesuit Social Services' Man Box study is the first Australian study to explore the association between attitudes to masculine stereotypes and men's behaviour. The research shows that living up to the pressures of being a 'real man' causes harm to men and those around them, particularly women.⁶ The study found a relationship between adherence to strict and outdated masculine norms (the Man Box rules) and the perpetration of family and sexual violence, as well as a range of other poor health and social outcomes for men. For example, the men who most strongly agreed with the Man Box rules were:

- 17 times more likely to have hit their partner
- six times more likely to have forced a partner to do something sexual that is degrading or humiliating
- eight times more likely to have thoughts of suicide nearly every day
- six times more likely to exhibit signs of problem gambling
- twice as likely to binge drink.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2026). Sexual violence [\[Weblink\]](#);

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024). Recorded Crime - Victims, 2024, ABS, Canberra. [\[Weblink\]](#)

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024). Recorded Crime - Victims, 2024, ABS, Canberra. [\[Weblink\]](#)

⁴ Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (2024). *Final Report – Volume 3: Military sexual violence, unacceptable behaviour and military justice* [\[Weblink\]](#)

⁵ Our Watch (2026). The link between gender inequality and violence against women. [\[Weblink\]](#)

⁶ The Men's Project & Flood, M. (2024). *The Man Box 2024: Re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia*. Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services.



Research shows that men in the most male-dominated occupations tend to adhere more strongly to certain masculine gender norms, such as endorsement of violence, heterosexual presentation, and having power over women.⁷ Defence force organisations have been described as hyper-masculine, often promoting traits like aggression, physical toughness, risk-taking, self-discipline, [REDACTED] loyalty. This creates a workplace that is hostile to [REDACTED] assessment and assault, and underreporting,⁸ as well as poorer mental health among men.⁹

The Man Box research, alongside other studies, highlights the need to focus on decreasing rigid adherence to harmful masculine norms as part of efforts to prevent and reduce all forms of gendered violence. It also shows that challenging rigid gender norms has a dual benefit of both preventing men's violence and improving the mental health and wellbeing of men and boys. Building organisational and workforce capacity to challenge harmful gender norms – particularly within male-dominated industries – is an important part of creating safe and inclusive workplaces for women and people who identify as LGBTQIA+ and of increasing their representation and leadership within these workplaces.

We welcome the Bill's recognition that building a safe, inclusive and gender-equitable defence force requires a whole-of-organisation approach, supported by strong leadership,¹⁰ who play an essential role both in creating the authorising environment for change and role modelling equitable attitudes and behaviours. We also support the Bill's focus on ensuring the whole defence workforce is trained in sexual assault prevention, intervention and response, including bystander intervention.¹¹

There is scope to adapt existing workplace programs for the defence forces. For example, The Men's Project delivers a range of evidence-based programs for workplaces, including in male-dominated industries such as construction – with the case study below as one such example.

⁷ Milner A, Kavanagh A, King T, Currier D (2018). The Influence of Masculine Norms and Occupational Factors on Mental Health: Evidence From the Baseline of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Male Health. *Am J Mens Health*. Jul 2018;12(4):696-705. [[Weblink](#)]

⁸ Australian Army Research Centre (2013). Sexuality, Cohesion, Masculinity and Combat Motivation: Designing Personnel Policy to Sustain Capability, *Australian Army Journal*, Volume 10, Number 3, Culture Edition. [[Weblink](#)].

⁹ Milner A et al (2018). The Influence of Masculine Norms and Occupational Factors on Mental Health, op cit.

¹⁰ See, for example, clauses 110ZMP, 110ZMZ, 110ZNA.

¹¹ Clause 110ZMP.



Case study: Improving safety and wellbeing in the construction industry

Rigid adherence to stereotypical ideas about what it means to be a man is prevalent in male-dominated industries. The construction sector has been identified as one of the highest occupational risk sectors in Australia,¹² where women are at particular risk of experiencing gendered violence in the workplace. This

women leaving the construction industry 38% faster than men. Construction workers more than twice as likely to die by suicide

than other young Australian men.¹⁴

The Men's Project delivers evidence-based programs for the construction sector that challenge harmful gender norms in order to improve wellbeing, behaviour and safety. We engage with organisations to identify and address beliefs and behaviours which may lead to poor mental health and suicidality, alcohol and drug abuse, workplace bullying, sexual harassment, low female workforce participation, risk taking behaviour, and absenteeism.

For example, in Victoria, The Men's Project has partnered with ICON Construction to deliver a whole-of-organisation approach to Inclusion, Equality and Safety through tiered training and support for leaders, project managers, site managers, other key influencers, contractors, and onsite staff. The partnership aims to generate positive cultural change, towards inclusion, gender equality and safety (including violence and harm reduction). The partnership project incorporates: intensive training for leadership; establishment of a network of "site champions" who receive training in bystander intervention to influence their peers; regular toolbox talks to reinforce key messaging; and a video series that introduces key concepts.

The SAPIR Commission must focus on creating a safe, inclusive and gender equitable work environment to prevent sexual violence

To prevent sexual violence within the defence forces, the SAPIR Commission must work to create a safe, inclusive and gender equitable work environment for women and LGBTQIA+ people within the defence forces.¹⁵ In addition to proactively challenging harmful gender norms and sexist attitudes, this requires attention to addressing gendered practices and structures that directly or indirectly discriminate against or disadvantage women and LGBTQIA+ people.

Examples of inclusive workplace policies and practices that support more gender equitable work environments include:

- Encouraging flexible working hours and part-time roles for members with caring responsibilities, including men – ideally role-modelled by leadership
- Pay equity

¹² Ross, V, Caton, N, Gullestrup, J and Kloves, K. (2020). A Longitudinal Assessment of Two Suicide Prevention Training Programs for the Construction Industry. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. [\[Weblink\]](#)

¹³ Victoria Government (2019). *Victoria's Women in Construction Strategy*. [\[Weblink\]](#)

¹⁴ SafeWork NSW (2022). *Findings Report: Mental Health in Construction 2022*. [\[Weblink\]](#)

¹⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission (2020). *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces* [\[Weblink\]](#)



- Identifying and addressing barriers to the recruitment and/or promotion of women and LGBTIQ+ people, including implicit bias and non-essential job requirements that directly or indirectly disadvantage women
- Ensuring the physical infrastructure supports women, such as adequate female change

Creating safe, inclusive and gender equitable workplaces also involves addressing gender-based harassment in male-dominated industries – harassment that is not necessarily sexual in nature, but is targeted at individuals, or a group of individuals, because of their sex or gender.¹⁶ Gender-based harassment can be much less overt than sexual harassment and often involves women being made to feel like unwelcome outsiders who will never be ‘one of the boys’.¹⁷

We need to intervene early with boys to prevent violence

While this Bill is focused on preventing and responding to sexual violence in the defence forces, we know that gendered attitudes are formed early in life and influence behaviour from a young age.¹⁸ For example, our Adolescent Man Box research found that boys aged 14 to 18 who most strongly internalise restrictive masculine norms are more likely to hold harmful attitudes, engage in abusive behaviours, and struggle with their own wellbeing.¹⁹

This highlights the importance of intervening early with boys and young men to challenge harmful gender norms across a range of settings where there is an opportunity engage and influence them, such as schools and sports clubs.

Jesuit Social Services’ [The Men’s Project](#) undertakes [research](#) to build a greater understanding of men’s violence and child sexual abuse, including opportunities for prevention and early intervention. We also deliver a range of programs in different settings that seek to build the capability of those who work with men and boys (such as teachers and coaches) to challenge harmful gender norms that drive domestic, family and sexual violence, and to intervene earlier with boys and young men at higher risk of using violence. These include [Modelling Respect and Equality \(MoRE\)](#), [Active Respect](#) and Change Makers.

While prevention and early intervention work with men and boys has increased in recent years, further investment is needed to scale up high quality prevention and early intervention programs if we are to make meaningful progress in reducing violence against women and children and LGBTIQ+ communities.

The Committee may wish to consider opportunities to intervene earlier with men and boys to challenge harmful gender norms as part of its Inquiry.

¹⁶ Foley, M., Oxenbridge, S., Cooper, R., & Baird, M. (2022). ‘I’ll never be one of the boys’: Gender harassment of women working as pilots and automotive tradespeople. *Gender, Work & Organization*. 29:5, 1676-1691. [[Weblink](#)]

¹⁷ Foley et al (2022). op cit.

¹⁸ Martin, C.L. (ed.) (2025). Gender: Early Socialization. *Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development*. [[Weblink](#)]

¹⁹ The Men’s Project 2025, The Adolescent Man Box: Findings from a survey with Australian adolescents aged 14-18 years, Jesuit Social Services: Melbourne. [[Weblink](#)]



Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed Bill. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our submission further at a hearing before the Committee.

Yours sincerely,



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