

Defence sexual assault reports rising and navy and air force falling short on female recruitment

Report shows 245 incident reports received by sexual misconduct prevention and response office in 2015-16

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Royal Australian Navy personnel. The navy performed the worst in terms of female recruitment, ending the year with just 146 additional women. Photograph: Dan Himbrechts/AAP

The navy and air force are failing to meet their female recruitment targets, despite a concerted effort from defence to improve its treatment of women.

Reports of aggravated sexual assaults within the defence force have also continually risen each year since 2012-13, albeit marginally, while reported acts of indecency are now at their highest level in five years.

Defence launched a [major program of cultural reform](#) in 2012, following a number of sexual abuse scandals, including the 2011 [Australian Defence Force Academy \(ADFA\) Skype case](#).

[The strategy](#) was informed by a comprehensive review by the then sex discrimination commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, and included the setting of 2023 recruitment targets; 25% female participation for navy and air force and 15% for army.

Strong [public statements on gender equity were made](#), including by [Australian of the year David Morrison](#), while defence created specialist recruiting teams, developed advertising and websites specifically targeting women, and removed barriers thought to be preventing entry, including reducing initial minimum periods of service.

But a new report shows the navy and air force are falling behind on female recruitment.

The [annual “women in the ADF” report](#), published by defence in recent weeks, shows both services were only able to achieve marginal net increases to the number of women in their ranks in 2015-16.

The navy performed the worst, ending the year with just 146 additional women, while the air force increased its number of women by 344.

The report warned both services were not on track to achieve the 2023 targets. The army achieved a net increase of 676 women and is on track to achieve its much lower target.

A [separate report](#), also recently published, showed 245 sexual misconduct incident reports were received by defence’s recently established sexual misconduct prevention and response office in 2015-16.

The majority related to sexual assaults, acts of indecency, or other offences against the person, while roughly 30% were sexual harassment complaints and 5% related to pornography.

The number of reports was lower than the two previous years but was still well above 2011-12 and 2012-13, when 217 and 194 sexual misconduct reports were received respectively.

Defence received 30 reports of aggravated sexual assaults in 2015-16, continuing an increase year-on-year since the 20 reports received in 2012-13. There were also 85 reports of acts of indecency in 2015-16, the highest number in five years.

The current sex discrimination commissioner, Kate Jenkins, is continuing to work with defence on its cultural reforms.

Jenkins told Guardian Australia the fact that defence was publicly reporting on female recruitment “demonstrates their commitment to meeting the targets”.

“I have no doubt that the ADF’s senior leadership are working constructively to meet these targets,” she said. “Some of these initiatives may take some time to result in recruitment. It is also important that the ADF focus on retaining women by creating an inclusive, fair workplace that supports flexibility and sees diversity as a capability multiplier.”

Jenkins warned it was important for defence’s leadership not to become complacent but said they were “acutely aware” of the challenges they faced and that there “is still work to be done”.

The Australian Defence Association's executive director, Neil James, said boosting female recruitment was a complicated task and needed to reverse decades of military inattention toward women.

James said there was a ceiling on the level of female interest in military service across western nations, not just Australia.

“It doesn't matter how much you try to change those percentages, you're coming up against a pretty strong paradigm in western society, that females don't want to join the military,” James said.

He said defence was currently pursuing reforms to make it easier for serving members to switch between full-time and part-time service.

That reform, named Project Suakin, was unique to Australia and would help drive female participation, he said.

“You'll increase your female participation in the defence workforce, because you'll make it more attractive for people to do it as a career,” he said. “It will give them a career structure for permanent part-time service.”

Topics

- [Australian defence force](#)

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