

Sexual assault still plagues Australia's defence forces and 'boys will be boys' doesn't help

By Megan MacKenzie Updated about 6 hours ago 17 July 2019



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During an interview I conducted with a US female service member last month, she recounted being assaulted by the chaplain assigned to her battalion.

She soon discovered she was not his only victim and was still grappling with mixed emotions about the event, including shock and anger.

The US military has a global reputation as having an out-of-control problem with sexual violence within its ranks.

Just a few weeks ago, the Pentagon put out a report indicating that sexual assaults against women in the services were [up by 38 per cent](#).

It might be tempting to hope things are better within the Australian Defence Force, but our own problems with military sexual violence persist.

Tip of the iceberg

It's been years since the infamous "[Skype sex](#)" and "[Jedi council](#)" scandals inspired multiple internal reviews, a declaration of zero tolerance of sexual misconduct by the ADF, and a viral video featuring David Morrison drawing a line in the sand, declaring that "the standard you walk past is the standard you accept," and telling soldiers with sexist beliefs to "get out" of the services.



[YouTube: David Morrison drawing a line in the sand on sexual assault](#)

Despite these grand gestures, multiple internal reviews, declarations of zero tolerance, and an entire new unit dedicated to military sexual assault victims, sexual assault remains intransigent within the institution. In short, when it comes to military sexual assault in the ADF, nothing has changed — both in terms of the rates, and how the public makes sense of this violence.

The ADF has made public declarations of "zero tolerance" approximately every five years over the past two decades, even as rates of sexual assault and misconduct remain steady, and in some years increasing. (265 total incidents were reported in 2016/2017 compared to 261 in 2014/2015 and 252 in 2015/2016)

These rates should be seen as the tip of the iceberg, with evidence indicating that only a small proportion of service victims are likely to report.

In addition to the consistently high rates of assault, the ADF continues to face scandals that defy an image of zero tolerance. For example, in 2017 it was discovered that [ADF personnel were participating on a Facebook group page](#) that joked about rape, violence against women, and child sexual assault. Veterans described the behaviour as "backlash" against progressive initiatives to change military culture.

In late 2018, an [Australian Army officer raped a man](#) at a work function. His lawyer called it "tomfoolery gone wrong".

A few weeks ago, a former [Duntroon cadet accused of raping another cadet](#) was released when the trial ended with a hung jury.

[How the justice system lets down victims of sexual assault](#)



[Being raped was the first of countless challenges I faced as a victim of sexual assault.](#)

'Boys will be boys'

Why is military sexual assault still happening, despite multiple efforts to address it?

After studying 30 years of media coverage of this issue, "boys will be boys" seems to be the catch cry. My colleagues Eda Gunaydin, Umeya Chaudhuri and I analysed hundreds of articles and found that military sexual violence in the ADF is consistently justified in the media and by military leaders as acceptable and inevitable as a result of young soldiers' uncontrollable natures.

In the ADF, there are beliefs that the military is so exceptional that service members cannot be held to the same standards of behaviour as civilians.

The ADF is one of the most trusted public institutions, viewed as exceptionally disciplined, honourable, and featuring a unique internal culture. Our research revealed competing and somewhat paradoxical narratives used to describe military culture that are revealing of how military sexual violence becomes accepted.

Military culture is described as unique and cultivating indescribable bonds that are necessary for military success; however, this same culture of elite masculinity and loyalty that is seen as necessary for warfare, is also attributed to persistent internal sexual violence.

The public is consistently told that necessary aspects of military training foster uncontrollability, recklessness, and a sense of immunity in men that can lead to sexual assault.

There are two underlying assumptions here: first, that if men are left to their own devices, they will naturally assault women, and second, good soldiers have a "wild" warrior nature that must be nurtured.

These negative stereotypes harm both men and women and need to be called out, rather than used to further justify a toxic military culture.

Military sexual violence is elevated, regular and predictable within the ADF. The situation in the US seems even more dire. What unites both cases is that neither country seems ready to challenge the "boys will be boys" justification and acknowledge the very real damage it can inflict.

Megan MacKenzie is a professor of gender and war in the Department of Government and International Relations and a visiting fellow at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney. A panel discussion, ["When will the military have its #MeToo moment?"](#), is on at the University of Sydney tonight, Wednesday, July 17, at 6pm with free entry.

Topics: [sexual-misconduct](#), [defence-industry](#), [australia](#), [united-states](#)

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