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2015 Defence White Paper 2015
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Russell Offices
Department of Defence
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Dear Expert Panel members

2015 Defence White Paper

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the public consultations regarding the 2015 Defence White Paper. The comments that follow are based on my extensive experience with the Australian Defence Force, examining its culture and structures, and how they impact on women as part of my Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force. The results of my work show a critical link between cultural reform – the building of a diverse and inclusive military – and capability. Details of the Review and the outcome reports are available at: https://defencereview.humanrights.gov.au/.

Two questions in the Issues Paper are specifically relevant to this submission. These are:

- How can the ADF ensure that Australians have confidence in the organisational culture, abilities and professionalism of their armed forces?
- With Australia’s changing demographics, can the ADF continue to recruit the right people and meet the expectations of Australia’s youth and the community as a whole?

However, as this letter identifies, the critical issue is that the ADF’s very capability and operational effectiveness rest on its ability to build a workforce whose skills match the realities of modern warfare. This requires a workforce that is diverse and inclusive, a workforce where men and women serve as equal partners.

In the last decade or so, many major organisations, in Australia and internationally, have come to realise that a diverse and inclusive workforce is beneficial to their operations or business. In particular, organisations across the globe are actively investing in attracting, developing and retaining women. Motivations for this vary, though all centre on the need to recruit from a wider talent pool, and recognition that gender-balanced and more diverse teams, including leadership teams, perform
better. Studies demonstrate that greater gender diversity at senior levels correlates with better performance.

Until recently, the ADF has drawn its workforce from a narrow segment of the population – Anglo-Celtic males. Such an approach would leave any organisation at a disadvantage in an increasingly multifaceted and fast-paced world. With an increasing focus on technology and problem solving, modern military workplaces are complex and evolving. Without a sustainable workforce strategy, one that embraces 100% of the talent – without a wider range of skills to engage in future theatres of war (cyber warfare, urban warfare, counter insurgency) – over time, our security forces will become less and less effective. Today’s Defence Force demands a range of skills – adaptability, strategic thinking, working in small teams with minimal direction, remote work, intelligence gathering and outreach to local populations – work where women especially, are essential. Some commentators note this so called ‘changing battlefield’, observing that new types of work and skills will grow in importance, as remote work through technology becomes increasingly possible.

As well as being able to recruit from a wider talent pool and to have a more diverse leadership profile, the ADF needs to stem the tide of unwanted departures (and their significant associated costs) which my research has found can be as a result of: members’ inability to balance career and caring responsibilities; an inability to access flexible work arrangements; occupational segregation, resulting in certain trades and professions providing limited leadership opportunities for women; and unacceptable behaviour, sexual misconduct and sexual abuse, and poor responses to these incidents.

National organisations gain their legitimacy by reflecting the views and make-up of the population. The under-representation of women leaders in the military means that the ADF is not keeping up with changes in Australia’s workforce. Increasing the representation of women, and improving their pathways into leadership, goes to the very heart of the sustainability and capability of the ADF.

Accelerated efforts in recent times show that the ADF is moving ahead with a broad cultural change agenda which is showing promising results. This is a testament to the recognition in ADF leadership ranks of the importance of achieving gender diversity and cultural change across all levels of the organisation. Each of the Services has implemented a range of innovative and bold recruitment strategies targeting women.

When I began my Review there had only been a 1% increase in the number of women entering the ADF in the past decade. However, since the Review, each of the Services has set targets for the recruitment of women, and this is delivering results. The proportion of women enlisting across the whole of the ADF in all categories has risen from 15.6% in 2010/2011 to 18.6% in 2012/13. In addition to this, gender targets have been set for employment groups with less than 15% representation of women. Working towards this target will help build a critical mass in those areas that have a low representation of women.

My Review found that there are a range of roles within each Service that could reasonably be performed under an appropriate flexible work arrangement. Defence has set a target for the uptake of flexible work arrangements across all trained forces by December 2014. Encouraging such arrangements not only benefits individuals
who choose to work flexibly, but it is now widely recognised that access to flexibility is a strong retention tool.

A key finding from my Review was that gender based harassment and violence ruins lives, divides teams and damages capability and operational effectiveness. A survey conducted for the Review identified that in the five years from 2012, 25.9% of women had experienced sexual harassment in an ADF workplace. The survey found that 10% of men had experienced sexual harassment. My research also found that victims were often reluctant to complain for fear of reprisals, victimisation, or perceived negative impacts on their career opportunities. For many, discharging or suffering in silence were the only options. These outcomes have a direct impact on capability.

The establishment of the Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office (SeMPRO) and the implementation of a restricted reporting regime for complainants – two key recommendations of my Review – have been positive developments in Defence. These initiatives provide for a supportive, sensitive and discreet reporting system for complainants of sexual misconduct, and put their needs and wishes at the forefront of any action taken.

Despite the progress, greater efforts need to be made to ensure that diversity and inclusion are visible, practiced and championed across all levels of the ADF. My Review found that members have little understanding of why the treatment of women is important to enhance capability. Cultural change was seen by some as unfairly advantaging women, giving them “special treatment” or little more than “political correctness.” Defence must proactively communicate the organisational benefits of the cultural reform agenda throughout the organisation.

It is critical that the ADF sustain the momentum for cultural reform, to fully realise the benefits of an inclusive military where women and men are equal partners – a military that will be a strong force into the future and a modern, first class employer with a first class reputation. The focus on cultural reform and a diverse and inclusive workforce should provide a strong element of the 2015 Defence White Paper.

Yours sincerely

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