



Ireland

‘Very hard to believe’ Defence Forces chief was not aware of abuse in the military – former captain

At least one instance of alleged sexual assault reported directly to Lieut Gen. Seán Clancy before Women of Honour allegations

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Defence Forces chief, Lieut Gen. Seán Clancy, is under pressure to explain his comments, given his previous role as a deputy chief of staff with overall command of HR matters. Photograph: Niall Carson/PA

Conor Gallagher

Ellen O'Donoghue

Fri. Mar. 31. 2023. - 19:33



It is “very, very hard to believe” Defence Forces Chief of Staff Lieut Gen Seán Clancy was not aware of widespread abuse within the military, one of the

members of the Women of Honour group has said.

Diane Byrne, a former army captain who was the subject of unlawful discrimination during her time in the organisation, was responding to the general's comments in the wake of the hard-hitting report from the Independent Review Group (IRG) which detailed extensive patterns of inappropriate and illegal behaviour within the military and concluded the Defence Forces "barely tolerated women".

On Wednesday, Lieut Gen Clancy told the media: "Throughout my career, answering honestly, other than the disciplinary, the standard disciplinary impacts that you would have in the workplace, those standard types of practices; I would not have been aware of them."

Pressure has since grown on the Defence Forces chief to explain his comments, given his previous role as a deputy chief of staff with overall command of human resource matters.

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The Irish Times has learned the general was personally informed of at least one sexual assault before the Women of Honour allegations first surfaced in 2021.

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In September 2020, a senior officer personally informed Lieut Gen Clancy that a Defence Forces Covid-19 taskforce had held an outdoor barbecue the previous June, apparently in contravention of lockdown restrictions.

During the event, two female noncommissioned officers had allegedly been sexually assaulted by a superior officer, the general was told. The accused officer has since been convicted by court martial of one count of sexual assault and is awaiting sentence.

“It’s very, very hard to believe that he wasn’t in the know,” said Ms Byrne, in response to the general’s comments earlier this week.

She said she and colleagues have been raising issues around abuse for years “through the system, the chain of command, the courts, ministers, the representative associations”.

“Everybody has fought hard before they got to this point. Everybody knew.”

Ms Byrne said she understands Lieut Gen Clancy is only in his current position a short period of time, adding: “We don’t want to get distracted on attacks on an individual because there are many individuals.”

The Government has accepted the IRG’s recommendations that a statutory inquiry be established to examine the allegations it raised. “Let the statutory investigation investigate who knew what,” said Ms Byrne.

Lieut Gen Clancy has not publicly addressed his comments since he made them on Wednesday. It is understood he believes he is being quoted out of context and that he did not mean to suggest he was unaware of any serious abuse.

“He was tired and the comments probably a bit clumsy. Of course he knew. He has previously said publicly he was aware of abuse. I think he was trying to say on Wednesday he wasn’t aware of the scale of it,” one source said.

In response to a request for comment on Friday, Lieut Gen Clancy said: “The findings of this report are stark and we need to change. There is no place for any form of abuse, or failure to act on any form of inappropriate behaviour in the Defence Forces. It is contrary to our ethos and values and will not be tolerated.”

The Defence Forces said it accepts the report's findings and will work to fulfil "all approved recommendations".

In the Seanad on Thursday, Independent Senator Tom Clonan, a retired Defence Forces officer whose research previously highlighted abuse of women in the military, said the general's comments on Wednesday are "not a credible position" and called for him to be called before the Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to explain them. This was supported by Fine Gael Senator Regina Doherty.

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The committee's chairman Fine Gael TD Charlie Flanagan told The Irish Times the committee members will decide its order of business but that in his view, it should wait until the Government outlines what form the statutory inquiry will take.

On Friday President Michael D Higgins, said the IRG report highlights "the need for a restructuring of the relationship between officer and enlisted ranks".

In a strongly worded statement, Mr Higgins said: "What has been revealed in this report, a report made possible by the coming forward of some of the bravest of the brave to have served our country, was not a simple set of random occurrences.

"It is explicitly stated in the report that there is a continuing systemic problem of incidents of bullying, harassment, discrimination, and sexual harassment within the Defence Forces."

The president – who serves as supreme commander of the Defence Forces – said the report showed dignity and respect were not emphasised as primary and driving values of the organisation.

"That must change. I welcome the Government's speedy and full acceptance of the recommendations of the review. The public will now expect that these recommendations be implemented in full and without delay," he said.

“There can be no continuation of any of this deeply unacceptable, indeed criminal, behaviour. I wish all those who will undertake this vital task the stamina, the energy, the sense of urgency and the integrity that is needed for one of the most important tasks of transformation in our State.”



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Women of Honour Defence Forces

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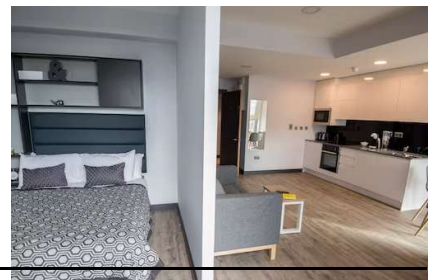
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