

RESEARCH REPORT

Women and Job Satisfaction In Today's Canadian Armed Forces' Climate

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Women continue to struggle in order to integrate successfully into the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). This study examined the cultural experiences of ten non-commissioned female-identified members serving in the ranks of Corporal to Sergeant in male-dominated, non-combat arms occupations. The volunteers were asked 28 questions in a confidential one-on-one setting, including 5 questions regarding the CAF's Operation HONOUR initiative.

Four main themes emerged from the data: motivation, elemental differences, navigating gender, and the impressions of Operation HONOUR. Congruency of interests, skills, and experience strongly influenced job satisfaction. Five participants indicated that they would have selected a different occupation when enrolling in the organization. Despite instances of tokenism and harassing language and behaviours directed at the servicewomen throughout their careers, poor leadership in general and difficulties with overly competitive serving members had been the primary reasons for two members to consider exiting the CAF. Job satisfaction was linked primarily to the perception of being provided challenging, interesting, and fulfilling work. Direct or indirect support from superiors and peers also related to job satisfaction.

Postings and their associated environments of Army, Navy, or Air Force strongly influenced the women's personal and professional experiences, with the Navy and Army being associated more closely with overall more misogynist treatment of women. The women navigated their gender in numerous ways, with most problems stemming from pregnancy and child care, and managing heavily physically demanding tasks. Male-to-male interactions were described as more physical and easygoing, cross-sex interactions were complex and varied but most often related to discrimination against females because of pregnancy and child care, and female-to-female interactions were described as extremes of either camaraderie to counteract male peer interactions or highly competitive and counter-productive. Female superiors in particular were mostly described in a highly negative manner, compared to male superiors.

All of the servicewomen were very familiar with the Operation HONOUR initiative. Nine interviewees believed that Operation HONOUR has made a positive difference, although five believed that it has been implemented in too extreme a manner, and in some ways their daily functioning has been more difficult because of servicemen's retaliation to the initiative.

Recommendations for Practice

The final results of the study, combined with prior research, revealed limitations and produced recommendations for practice and future CAF research, in order to improve functioning and the experiences of Canada's servicewomen in particular.

Adaptation to the Military

Transitioning from regular Canadian society to military life can be particularly challenging for younger and more easily influenced members. Eight participants had entered the Forces either immediately following high school, or shortly thereafter. At the time of the study interviews, all of the participants were trained in their occupations, five had served in more than one environment, three had served in more than one occupation, two had served in the Primary Reserve, and two were employed in specialty roles. Nine appeared to have mostly adapted to

the military and, for those members who had changed their occupations, their decisions were not as a result of their environments but instead matched their interests and skillsets to occupations that inspired and motivated them.

Many of the participants had undergone a transition throughout their careers in which they described themselves as “naïve” when they had considered joining the Forces. Because recruiting centres have decreased in number, and the Internet is now the primary method of gathering information about life in the Forces, the accuracy and breadth of the Forces’ recruiting site is designed to entice members to join, but it should also portray realistic life in the Forces. Non-Commissioned Members (NCMs) comprise the majority of the CAF’s female serving members and therefore should be reflected more often on the website than officers who are facing challenges while serving. Males, single parents, and divorced members who cope with these types of demands could also be included in recruiting testimonials. All stages of a military member’s career, from initial research using the recruiting website, to training and employment needs, should reflect gender equality. Two participants self-identified as members of the LGBTQ community who were in relationships and had no children, two self-identified as single parents, one had supported extended family members for a time following her enrolment, and two self-identified as married with children.

Canada’s military has progressed from reflecting a dominant military culture to a male/female culture that also includes visible minorities. Ironically, the absence of LGBTQ membership, single parents, and other lesser visible minority populations on the Forces’ website is not congruent with the Forces’ diverse membership and its message of acknowledgement and acceptance of this diversity. Comparable subtitles and associated information and photos that match men, women, and LGBTQ members would mitigate the problem of addressing women on the site as the gender that needs to be attended to separately, particularly regarding managing child care.

Tokenism was evident in some cases, when participants were singled out because of their gender and were encouraged or expected to act in gender-stereotypical ways – notably during their initial training or employment. It could be argued that the words and photos on the CAF’s recruiting website could create and instill concepts of tokenism that extend to the initial military training setting and into the subsequent military workplace.

Recommendations. Avoid stereotypes on the CAF’s recruiting websites. For example, portray both male and female members fulfilling the role of a single parent and same-sex dual-parent families. Also provide a demographic spectrum of serving members that is comprised of NCM and officer ranks, both genders, and members who comprise the minority populations such as LGBTQ members who thrive, compensate, persevere, and even fail within the organization. Provide a more realistic and balanced view of both genders and more fully orient potential applicants to military life and what they may realistically face, particularly if they simultaneously strive to achieve a family and a military career.

Gender-Related Issues

No pattern was observed between sexual harassment and the elements. Patterns of behaviours that were attributed to the Army, Navy, or Air Force elements mostly related to the participants’ quality of relationships within the workplace, which strongly associated with job satisfaction. The field environment was usually associated with the Army’s more outward demonstrations of men’s physical prowess, verbal downgrading of women’s physical capabilities, and stronger adherence to military rank structure. The participants also referred to their physical difficulties within the field environments of the Navy and Army. Despite these difficulties in the field settings, most of the servicewomen had been cognizant of which trades they desired, had pursued them, and had fully embraced and enjoyed their occupational tasks. However, there was some regret expressed for not having liaised with more females prior to

joining the CAF. Moreover, some had no, very limited, or delayed support when they experienced harassment.

Recommendation. Offer diverse types of military orientation programs regarding enrolment in both the Regular Force and the Primary Reserve that are tailored specifically to women, but that are more flexible than requiring a lengthy on-site program. Perhaps this type of recruiting could be demonstrated online, such as in a virtual reality program, but also accurately portray the advantages and disadvantages of serving in the CAF and in each occupation.

Occupational Depictions

None of the current study's respondents expressed a desire to exit the organization because of a disinterest in the type of work that they associated with their occupations, two had changed their occupations following their entry or transfer into the CAF, and five indicated that they would not have accepted the same occupation that they did when they entered (or in two cases transferred to) the Regular Force. The participants reported having viewed accurate occupational descriptions on the Forces' recruiting website in some cases, but not in others. One woman noted that she would probably not have enrolled in her assigned occupation if the video depicting the occupation had demonstrated its strong field component. In her case, she observed that her occupation was actually depicted as another CAF occupation.

Recommendations. Balance recruiting goals with recruiting promotional materials or methods that depict all of the occupations and elements from a highly realistic viewpoint. For example, reflect the strong field, office, or heavy manual labour requirements of occupations where they exist. Regularly update descriptions and videos to accurately reflect changes within the occupations' training and employment.

Support Within the CAF

The interviewees were initially motivated to join because of external factors (financial and other benefits, funds to finish paying off their education, fun, and excitement), and a few of them joined because of a strong interest in a particular occupation or set of similar occupations. As time passed, their motivation to remain in either their occupations or the Forces focused primarily on their assigned occupations and the relationships that they developed throughout their careers. Their motivation to continue to serve was associated with support from superiors and colleagues. However, they applied various coping mechanisms in order to fit into the CAF, with very little to no mentorship, despite possessing relevant skills and experience related to the tasks required of them following their initial occupational training. Once the women were recruited and trained, they were mostly left alone to expend unnecessary energy navigating their gender in male-dominated occupations, with minimal same and cross-sex relationships.

The women who expressed an interest in leading were motivated by their desire to assist other servicewomen. Those respondents who noted that they had considered releasing at some point during their careers cited abuse of authority and poor leadership as the reasons for potential exit. Fair treatment, even if it was poor treatment, was consistently considered in a positive manner by the current study's respondents.

Recommendations. Provide mandatory mentorship training for all members in order to improve leadership and retention. Create more diverse training classes and encourage women and other minority populations to integrate with peers in order to develop healthier versus competitive relationships. Augment this training with classes that heighten awareness and counteract gender stereotypes. Also tailor the CAF's leadership and mentorship training according to gender (the results from the current study support the idea of different methods of leadership and different career motivators according to gender).

Harassment and Early Intervention

The respondents were highly self-sufficient and able to cope, partly by learning to suppress their emotions. Any problems encountered usually related to harassment or sexual harassment. However, none of the respondents who mentioned these barriers expressed a desire to leave their occupations or the CAF as a result. All but one incident was managed either by the participants themselves or their chains of command. However, the participants' morale was noticeably stronger when they spoke of gaining the support that they felt that they had earned, through their chains of command, and when harassment was dealt with swiftly and effectively. The CAF's latest efforts to manage low-level harassment garnered criticism by the members in the current study. Their reactions may be partially explained by their experiences prior to the implementation of Operation HONOUR; some participants felt that the discipline related to inappropriate sexual behaviours was too severe.

Supervisory support was evidently a strong factor related to job satisfaction when the current study's respondents expressed their desire to "give back" to the Forces. This support was also associated with the participants' feelings of well-being and career satisfaction. A distinct difference was noticeable regarding the styles and effectiveness of leadership and gender. The current study was replete with descriptions of female leaders as autocratic, biased, and more career oriented than male leaders. It appears that the competitive nature of the military and instances of abuse of the rank system can contribute to placing women in an even further disadvantaged position of being greatly outnumbered within the organization. However, all of the respondents reported having been able to manage, (or, in one case tolerate) the effects of poor leadership. The women's reports of some extremely dysfunctional leadership practices reflect that the distinction between the values and demands of Canada's military members and those of its civilian population is occasionally blurred by serving members.

Recommendations. All CAF members will quickly and effectively manage lower and higher levels of unacceptable conduct. Provide consistent training throughout members' careers in order to embrace ethics and professionalism, and to override contrary codes imbedded in the CAF's culture. Also communicate and reinforce this type of "buy-in" for the leadership ranks.

The Retention of Women in the CAF

Previous research has emphasized the requirement to retain women during peak periods of their careers and that demonstrating care and respect for its members and recognizing their contributions will enhance the members' emotional attachment to the military and job satisfaction and reduce their level of strain. It was evident from all of the participants' interviews that they required challenging and rewarding tasks that would eventually lead to progression in rank/higher-level challenges in their careers.

Three members had seriously considered leaving the CAF because of inadequate leadership in general. They also referenced a number of factors external to their occupational work, such as needing to volunteer and self-advocate in order to be promoted in rank. The respondents also cited barriers to career progression, such as not being "liked" and being held to a higher standard due to gender. Some of the servicewomen tended to underrate their own contributions and attested to occasionally demonstrating lower levels of confidence than their male peers when undertaking tasks. Confounding these issues, numerous examples of hostility or differential treatment directed at the respondents often involved their perceived (and at times actual and self-acknowledged) lesser physical strength, and their ability to bear children (and therefore experience absences and experience from their workplaces).

Recommendations. Train supervisors to recognize and implement a non-biased approach to leading and assessing, particularly regarding assigning tasks. Revamp the yearly personnel assessment procedure to reflect supervisory fairness and professionalism. Ensure that positions are backfilled when members take time off work for pregnancy or child care. CAF members

quickly assume military lingo and attach meaning to lingo that relates to the care of children. Labelling the type of leave to care for children should be based on parenting versus biological functions (i.e., eliminating the term “maternity leave” to encompass “parental leave,” or changing the term altogether), thereby creating a more balanced perspective on child care. Also scrutinize any changes to the CAF’s fitness testing in order to ensure that there is a perception of equality between the genders regarding the standards to pass, fail, or achieve a particular level.

Pregnancy and Child Care

The women in this study, whether single parents or in dual-parent families, had experienced numerous difficulties with securing childcare after hours and during deployments. Childrearing made it difficult for them to volunteer for opportunities to advance within their careers.

Recommendation. Provide appropriate and professional after-hours and long-term child care for CAF members who are parents, in order to alleviate many of the difficulties associated with the stress of balancing child care and soldiering. This may mean providing additional funds for extended family members to travel for assistance with child care, particularly for single parents and those located in isolated or semi-isolated postings.

Feedback Regarding Operation HONOUR

Considering the issues that women, such as the ones in the current study, manage that are mostly unique to them because of their gender, it is not surprising that women navigate their gender in a variety of ways that reflect self-preservation when they witness or experience harassment or sexual harassment. One interviewee noted that no one wants to be “that girl” when they are faced with potentially reporting an instance of harassment.

Recommendations. Instead of singling any male or female members out in a crowd of either peers or superiors, solicit members’ feedback regarding Operation HONOUR on a one-on-one or anonymous basis. Ensure that all military members are aware of, have read, and understand policies regarding Operation HONOUR.

Improvements to Leadership

During recruit training, the socialization process is critical for imprinting the impressions of how members are treated within the military. The Forces has recently identified problems of inconsistent leadership and a requirement to update the leadership doctrine within the Forces. Unfortunately, very limited academic and military research targets how leadership and culture affect gender diversity and harassment. Research is currently underway to explore how leadership and culture influence sexual harassment and misconduct, and will investigate the influences of cultural and social factors on early entry into the Forces, and during environmental and occupational training, unit employment, and operational deployments. There is also very limited research that explores female-to-female interactions within the Canada’s military.

Recommendations. Instruct ethical and decisive leadership not only throughout initial leadership training, but also throughout members’ careers. Conduct research that examines the differences between the genders’ styles of leadership and their effectiveness.

About the Researcher

Born and raised in Manitoba, Captain (Retired) Pamela Pahl is a military veteran who completed her post-secondary schooling at Brandon University and Assiniboine Community College. She has been intrigued by gendered experiences in the military and is an advocate for serving or retired servicewomen.