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## IMPEDIMENTS AND SOLUTIONS TO RETAINING WOMEN IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

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#### Service Paper

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**IMPEDIMENTS AND SOLUTIONS TO RETAINING  
WOMEN IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES**

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## **IMPEDIMENTS AND SOLUTIONS TO RETAINING WOMEN IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES**

### **AIM**

1. The aim of this service paper is to identify current impediments and practical solutions to achieving Canada's Defence Policy mandate of 25% women in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) by 2027 through the lens of retention. The recommendations proposed here are intended to be implemented now, within the current system, given the short time period allocated to achieve this ambitious goal.

### **INTRODUCTION**

2. *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (SSE) directed the CAF to increase female representation in the CAF to 25% over a ten year period. Since the policy was released on 7 June 2017,<sup>1</sup> the CAF has proceeded with a number of targeted recruiting initiatives, including but not limited to OP GENERATION and Women in Force, which appear to be marginally increasing the number of women joining or considering a career in the CAF. Murray Brewster, a senior defence writer for CBC, reported in June of this year that "there were 860 women enrolled in the military in the last fiscal year, which ended on March 31 – an increase of eight percent over the previous year."<sup>2</sup> His article is critical of the fact that this is not a sufficient enough increase to reach the target goal laid out in SSE.

3. Despite criticism, it is clear that innovation in recruiting is underway with some success. While maintaining this focus on recruiting, the CAF must also focus its attention on retaining the women that currently serve in the CAF. This paper will therefore focus on the retention aspect of achieving this goal. "Unlike most civilian industries, mid-level and senior leaders cannot be simply hired into the CAF; it takes years of indoctrination and institutional experience to be a strong and seasoned member of the profession of arms."<sup>3</sup> Despite opening all occupations to women in 2001, a number of impediments continue to exist which are cumulatively causing women to leave. Specifically, at pension point, "the attrition rate of women officers is nearly double that of men."<sup>4</sup> This paper will outline five impediments that are affecting the retention of women in the CAF. First, the competing challenges of fertility and career coursing and/or command appointments. Second, meaningful employment of pregnant CAF members. Third, challenges associated with returning to work from Maternity/Paternity (MATA/PATA) leave. Fourth, balancing the unbalanced requirements of unpaid work. And finally, the length of posting cycles. In the recommendations section, each impediment will be provided with a solution that

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Canada, "Strong, Secure, Engaged" – A new defence policy for Canada," last modified 7 June 2017, [https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2017/06/strong\\_secure\\_engagedanewdefencepolicyforcanada.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2017/06/strong_secure_engagedanewdefencepolicyforcanada.html)

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, "Canadian military falling well short of its target for recruiting women," last modified 5 June 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/armed-forces-women-recruiting-1.4691356>

<sup>3</sup> D. Rood, "Potential Impediments and Solutions to Increasing Female Representation in the Canadian Armed Forces" (Joint Command and Staff Program Service Paper, Canadian Forces College, 2018), 2.

<sup>4</sup> T. Maurice, "Stopping the Talent Drain: Setting the Conditions for Female Retention in the Canadian Armed Forces" ((Joint Command and Staff Program Service Paper, Canadian Forces College, 2018), 22-23.

could be implemented within the current system to achieve the ambitious goal of 25% women in the CAF by 2027.

## DISCUSSION

4. There are many external factors that impact the careers of CAF members. Although not all women in the CAF have children, “it was found that [in the Canadian military] both men and women have children in nearly the same proportions, 53.3% of women and 50.6% of men.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, understanding the challenges associated with child care is essential for understanding impediments to women in the organization. Interestingly, where the difference in demographics between men and women is readily apparent, is in the area of spousal characteristics where “37% of women are part of a service couple.”<sup>6</sup> This added pressure of balancing the needs and requirements of two careers is disproportionately felt by women in the CAF given “only 6% of all men are members of a service couple.”<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that posting cycles also affect civilian spouses given the changing demographics of the Canadian workforce. “In 2014, 69% of couple families with at least one child under 16 were dual-earner families, up from 36% in 1976. Among dual-earner families, almost three-quarters had two parents working full time in 2014.”<sup>8</sup> The new normal is having both parents work which becomes challenging when juxtaposed against a system that was built based on a male workforce of single income families. While childcare is a significant stressor, with an aging Canadian population, elder care is also another factor that weighs heavily on members.

The number of people aged 85 and older grew by 19.4% over the period from 2011 to 2016, nearly four times the rate for the overall Canadian population. The centenarian population (i.e., those aged 100 and older) grew even faster, by 41.3%, to reach 8,230 people, making it the fastest-growing age group between 2011 and 2016.”<sup>9</sup>

The pressures of child and/or elder care create significant challenges for members especially in a career where deployments are common. To understand how these challenges create impediments to the number of women in the military, this paper will proceed chronologically along a woman’s career starting from conception to work-life balance to postings.

### Fertility

5. Most research indicates that female fertility rates decline rapidly after the age of 35. In fact, “age remains the single most important determinant of male and female fertility, either

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Statistics Canada, “Employment patterns of families with children,” last modified 27 November 2015, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2015001/article/14202-eng.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Statistics Canada, “A portrait of the population aged 85 and older in 2016 in Canada,” last modified 23 July 2018, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016004/98-200-x2016004-eng.cfm>

natural or treated”<sup>10</sup>. As such, one of the impediments to women in the military is the timing of career coursing and pregnancy. If the majority of women join the CAF when they are 19 years old, this puts their optimal fertility at a time when women are expected to challenge career coursing and/or command appointments. This pressure between career and life choices is compounded by a real risk that if a woman waits too long to have children, she may not be able to have them herself. As such, if women are not supported in delaying coursing or postings due to the timing of pregnancy, some women choose to give up on the prospect of Command all together because they cannot reconcile how they will be able to have children and balance these competing requirements. Although not a singular factor for leaving the military, it is certainly one of the ‘nails in the coffin’ that may convince a woman to ultimately leave the military to focus on family instead.

### **Employment while Pregnant**

6. Another impediment to women in the CAF is meaningful employment while pregnant. While great strides have been made in areas such as allowing women to sail and fly until 20 weeks pregnant, the CAF often deals with the employment of pregnant women in a knee-jerk reaction despite the fact that women have been serving for more than 100 years<sup>11</sup>. As such, some women lose up to nine months of gainful employment depending on whether or not they can continue at their primary occupation. “In positive psychology, gainful employment is characterized by the quality of the job, which includes more than just income. Psychology’s definition of gainful employment focuses on aspects of a job that enrich one’s life and make it more fulfilling.”<sup>12</sup> Depending on the occupation and gestation, some women may be required to transition away from their primary occupational duties while pregnant. This disparity in terms of quality work experience could be the difference between promotion that year depending on the member’s occupation. The CAF continues to lack the foresight to identify positions that are suitable for pregnant women which would provide meaningful work experience for that period. Again, while this may not be the reason women release, it slows the progression of CAF women given that the nine months of pregnancy are further compounded by a year to 18 months of MATA/PATA.

### **Transitioning Back to Work**

7. The transition from MATA/PATA leave back to work proves to be challenging for many members, regardless of gender. Aggravating this problem is the availability of child care which is limited when children are younger due to ratios. For example, in Ontario, the ratio for licensed

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<sup>10</sup> Juan Balasch and Eduard Gratacos, “Delayed Childbearing: Effects on Fertility and the Outcome of Pregnancy,” *Fetal Diagnosis and Therapy* Vol. 29, Iss. 4 (Jun 2011): 263, <https://search-proquest-com.cfc.idm.oclc.org/docview/874219491/fulltextPDF/E6C81666D895467DPQ/1?accountid=9867>

<sup>11</sup> National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, “Women in the Canadian Armed Forces,” last modified 14 August 2018, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/news/article.page?doc=women-in-the-canadian-armed-forces/hie8w7rm>

<sup>12</sup> Encyclopedia of Education Economics and Finance, “Gainful Employment,” last accessed 12 October 2018, <http://sk.sagepub.com.cfc.idm.oclc.org/reference/encyclopedia-of-education-economics-and-finance/i4505.xml?term=gainful%20employment>

childcare is three caregivers for every ten children at the facility<sup>13</sup> which means that spaces for infants are often limited and waitlisted. Additionally, some members may return to high tempo operational units, which may include deployments. Young children are sick often in the first few years of life and research by a family demographer at the Carsey Institute showed that “74 percent of working mothers had stayed home from work to care for a sick child compared to 40 percent of working fathers.”<sup>14</sup> The pressure from the availability of childcare, coupled with the competing demands of working and taking care of sick children, may force women to look for more flexible work arrangements. While some Chains of Command are supportive and understanding, this is not always the case for every member.

## Work-Life Balance

8. Research indicates that women are responsible for the bulk of unpaid work in the household. A useful definition of unpaid work comes from the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women, who defines it as “any work that women do in homes, communities, and workplaces that contributes to those environments and the people within them but which does not result in financial remuneration.”<sup>15</sup> Despite the changing demographics of the workforce, this gap in household responsibilities has not changed. Reporter Robson Fletcher, based out of Calgary, published an article in June 2017 with the title “Women spend 50% more time doing unpaid work than men: Statistics Canada.”<sup>16</sup> As such, many women choose to leave the CAF due to insufficient work-life balance. They find it challenging to maintain the hectic pace of a CAF career while also managing responsibilities at home.

## Predictability

9. Typical CAF postings are approximately two to four years. Most members find out the official plan for the following year about six months ahead of time. This lack of a long-term plan creates issues with respect to childcare for members. Most childcare facilities have long waitlists and six months is often not enough time to secure childcare. Given this challenge, many women decide to leave the CAF in order to provide better support to their children especially given that many members are not co-located with their extended family. This seems to be most pronounced at the 20 to 25 YOS point where “the attrition rate of women officers is nearly double that of men.”<sup>17</sup> As discussed, the challenges of eldercare are also compounded when postings bring members away from extended family. Many senior women, those who have completed a 20-25

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<sup>13</sup> Ontario, “Child care rules under the *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014* (CCEYA),” last accessed 12 October 2018, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/child-care-rules-child-care-and-early-years-act>

<sup>14</sup> Women in Academia Report, *Mothers Miss Work More Than Fathers to Care for Sick Children, According to University of New Hampshire Study* (Bartonsville: BruCon Publishing Company, 2012)

<sup>15</sup> Government of Prince Edward Island, “Policy Guide: Women and Unpaid Work,” last modified January 2003, [http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/acsw\\_paid\\_full.pdf](http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/acsw_paid_full.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “Women spend 50% more time doing unpaid work than men: Statistics Canada,” last modified 1 June 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/men-women-housework-unpaid-statistics-canada-1.4141367>

<sup>17</sup> T. Maurice, “Stopping the Talent Drain: Setting the Conditions for Female Retention in the Canadian Armed Forces” ((Joint Command and Staff Program Service Paper, Canadian Forces College, 2018), 23.

year career, often decide to leave the CAF for better stability for their families because of a lack of a long term plan.

## CONCLUSION

10. While this list of impediments faced by women in the CAF is not exhaustive, it is a good starting point for understanding the challenges involved in the retention of women, especially at pension point. Many of these issues affect both men and women, such as the transition from MATA/PATA back to work and the predictability of postings, while others are unique to women, such as the challenges of fertility and employment while pregnant. Most CAF members struggle with work-life balance but this is further compounded when women do the bulk of unpaid work in the household.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

11. To remedy the issue of fertility conflicting with career coursing and/or command appointments, better conversation between the member and her career manager with respect to timing of coursing and appointments would allow women to more easily manage this challenge. The CAF needs to lift the veil of secrecy and have more candid conversations with its members. Additionally, greater flexibility should be given such that a woman could chose to delay a course and/or appointment without being penalized, in order to facilitate time to have a family. This means more open conversation is a requirement for retention of women to facilitate the challenges around fertility and age. While open dialogue may occur already for some members, it is certainly the exception not the norm.

12. To address the issue of employment while pregnant, more thought needs to be put in to the employment of women during this nine-month period. The Chain of Command (CofC) should be empowered to find positions that will allow women to continue their professional development and/or training while allowing some flexibility given that every pregnancy is different and some women may be able to work more than others. Career Managers should earmark positions that would be beneficial for both the member and the organization in order to maximize her employment prior to MATA/PATA leave. This would also ensure that she receives a Personnel Evaluation Report (PER) that would allow her to continue to be competitive alongside her peers, rather than losing nine months of meaningful employment.

13. To assist members returning from MATA/PATA leave, targeted mentorship should be implemented for women and men returning from MATA/PATA leave. Research indicates that mentorship is a valuable tool in decreasing attrition rates. “Mentoring helps women ideate about what they will become. For women to be more empowered in the workplace, it’s crucial to have structured mentorships where women can learn from each other.”<sup>18</sup> Mentors should engage mentees a few months prior to their return to work date. Mentors could discuss with mentees challenges associated with returning to work in addition to helping their Career Manager find

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<sup>18</sup> Forbes, “Why Female Mentorship in the Workplace is More Important than Ever,” last accessed 13 October 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/yec/2018/08/03/why-female-mentorship-in-the-workplace-is-more-important-than-ever/#3777a26b7291>

suitable employment for the member. While mentors do not need to be women, it would be helpful for women to be mentored by other women that have managed to balance work and family within the CAF. One could argue that this is or should be done by the CofC. Alternatively, providing a mentor outside of the CofC would guarantee more objectivity and a better overall assessment of the member's career. Normally, "the mentor's only agenda is to help you reach your full potential."<sup>19</sup> This cannot always be said about the CofC.

14. In order to assist with work-life balance, CofC should allow women and men to take advantage of flexible work hours when possible. Such an arrangement may mean that members work a longer day in order to work from home every other week. This flexibility could allow women to better manage responsibilities at home while still contributing to the organization. Recognizing that this may be difficult while deployed at sea for example, a little flexibility when the ship is alongside could pay dividends for retention of women over the long term. This should be managed at the lowest level of the member's CofC to ensure that the plan is flexible and responsive to any changes in the unit's operational schedule. While not a guarantee at every unit, the possibility of flexible work hours may be the incentive that helps the CAF retain its members.

15. A simple solution to the challenge of short posting cycles would be a two-year plan for each service member. Recognizing that things may change, Career Managers should attempt to forecast at least two years out for the member to facilitate appropriate child care support and provide better predictability. Additionally, Career Managers should consider longer postings where practical. Although the CAF system is designed around the idea of promotion and posting, members could be encouraged to choose to remain in the same location to better facilitate family support. This should not be frowned upon or punished but rather embraced as a way of decreasing attrition over all. Members should realize that this may affect their promotion given the upward/linear progression of CAF careers. Despite this, a two-year plan would pay dividends towards a better feeling of stability for members.

16. Implementing any or some of these recommendations would ensure that the CAF "aspire[s] to be a leader in gender balance in the military."<sup>20</sup> Much work has been done with respect to recruitment but more work needs to be done to retain the women that currently serve. Creativity and flexibility will be key to ensuring the CAF builds the workforce required for the conflicts of the future.

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<sup>19</sup> Huffington Post, "Why Women Need Mentors," last accessed 13 October 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kristin-meekhof/why-women-need-mentors\\_b\\_3671399.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kristin-meekhof/why-women-need-mentors_b_3671399.html)

<sup>20</sup> Government of Canada, "Strong, Secure, Engaged" – A new defence policy for Canada," last modified 7 June 2017, [https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2017/06/strong\\_secure\\_engagedanewdefencepolicyforcanada.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2017/06/strong_secure_engagedanewdefencepolicyforcanada.html)



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