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FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES: IS GROWTH HAPPENING?

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**FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES:
IS GROWTH HAPPENING?**

By Major Monica Bradley-Kuhn

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FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES : IS GROWTH HAPPENING?

AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to examine the progress of *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (SSE) goal of 25% female representation in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) by 2026. This work will provide leadership with updated information in the following three areas: the current status of CAF female representation, enrollment rates, and attrition figures. This paper concludes with recommendations that will assist the CAF in achieving a force that is one quarter female.

INTRODUCTION

2. Women have a long history of supporting the Canadian military. For example, during the World War years approximately 50,000 women were in uniform serving Canada.¹ At the end of World War II in 1945 the military recognized the need to maintain a small number of women in uniform, but the government opposed it.² The Government of Canada and the CAF have come a long way in the last 76 years in terms of integrating females into the force. The opening of the submariner occupation in 2001 now allows women to apply to every CAF occupation.³ With institutionalized barriers being broken down, it is now time to focus on growing the strength of females in the CAF. To accomplish this, the Defence Policy outlined the goal of increasing female representation to 25% by 2026.⁴ This objective set out in SSE is motivated by several factors, which are elaborated on below.

3. Increasing female representation in the CAF is important for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the CAF is a public institution and it must continuously strive to represent the Canadian people, and women comprise 50.4% of the population.⁵ As stated by a former Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Lawson:

...The profession of arms within a democracy must embody the same values, beliefs, and cultures that it strives to defend. Only through the accurate reflection of its military personnel from society at large will the citizenry accept the CAF as a legitimate defence institution.⁶

¹ Barbara T. Waruszynski et al., "Women Serving in the Canadian Armed Forces: Strengthening Military Capabilities and Operational Effectiveness," *Canadian Military Journal* 19, no. 2 (2019): 27.

² Waruszynski et al., "Women Serving in the Canadian Armed Forces: Strengthening Military Capabilities and Operational Effectiveness."

³ Government of Canada, "Women in the Forces," accessed February 2, 2021, <https://forces.ca/en/women-in-caf/>.

⁴ Government of Canada, "Strong Secured Engaged Canada's Defence Policy," 2017, 12.

⁵ Statistics Canada, "Female Population," accessed February 4, 2021, Stats Can, women living in Canada <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11475-eng.htm>.

⁶ Department of National Defence, "Canadian Armed Forces Employment Equity Plan 2015-2020" (Government of Canada, 2015), 1.

Secondly, gender and cultural diversity increase operational effectiveness for the CAF. International operations are shifting away from the historical standard of high intensity warfighting in remote locations to “full spectrum operations”.⁷ Females and other minority groups can better facilitate interfacing with non-governmental organizations and civilian populations, resulting in overall increased operational effectiveness.⁸ Lastly, employment equity is legislated in Canada through the 1986 Employment Equity Act (EEA) whereby public sector employers are to “eliminate employment barriers, institute positive policies and practices and make reasonable accommodations to ensure that designated group members (DGM) achieve representation in the employer’s workforce.”⁹ The CAF recognizes four DGM: women, Aboriginal peoples, visible minorities, and persons with disabilities.¹⁰ This paper will focus on women and how the CAF is fairing at employment equity and the increased female representation goal of 25%. As 2026 is five years away, it is critical to understand the CAF’s trajectory in accomplishing this goal. There is time remaining to course correct if necessary and incorporate innovative solutions to assist the CAF in achieving a force of 1 in 4 female members.

DISCUSSION

4. The CAF can increase female representation by way of two mechanisms: recruit new members and retain those already serving. This discussion will begin by presenting a statistical overview of female representation in the CAF since the publication of SSE. This will be followed by a focus on recruitment and enrollment data, as well as attrition and retention data.

Overview: CAF Female Representation

5. SSE was published in 2017 and the percentage of females in the CAF was 15.1% at that time.¹¹ This translates to a 1% annual increase of female representation in order for the CAF to reach the 2026 goal of 25%. If on track, the current percentage of females would be 19% by the end of the fiscal year (FY) 2020/2021. Unfortunately, such is not the case. The January 2021 employment equity (EE) statistics has CAF female representation at 16.1% for both Regular and Primary Reserve Force.¹² The CAF is deficient in the 1% annual growth of female representation and is behind by almost 3%. However, female representation is trending upwards, just not at the desired rate. The overall percentage of females in the CAF has increased from 15.1% in 2017 to 15.7% in 2019 and is currently 16.1%.¹³

⁷ Department of National Defence, “Canadian Armed Forces Employment Equity Plan 2015-2020” (Government of Canada), 2015, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Department of National Defence, “Employment Equity Officer Guidelines” (Government of Canada, 2015), 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ Government of Canada, “Strong Secured Engaged Canada’s Defence Policy,” 12.

¹² Directorate of Human Rights and Discrimination, “Canadian Armed Forces Employment Equity Statistics” (Department of National Defence, January 2021).

¹³ Government of Canada, “Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces Implementation of Canada’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security,” June 10, 2020,

6. The Directorate of Human Rights and Discrimination (DHRD) publishes data on female representation by branch: Navy is at 20.6%, Army at 13.6% and Air Force at 20.0%. The lowest female representation is for Non-Commissioned Members (NCM) in the Army at 13.0%. The category that has the highest female representation is for Officers in the Navy at 22.5%.¹⁴ A notable accomplishment is that Regular Force Officer female representation has increased across almost every occupational group in 2018/2019.¹⁵ Representation of women in the overall Regular Force has increased, but saw a decrease in the Primary Reserves. This may indicate that there was a large number of component transfers from the Primary Reserve to Regular Force.¹⁶

7. An important distinction needs to be made about the SSE's endeavour of 25% female representation by 2026. This is a goal, and not a quota. The DND/CAF progress report for Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security explains, "quotas are arbitrary numbers that are filled without regard for qualifications or merit. Merit and ability remain at the cornerstone of all the CAF recruitment activities and all candidates must meet the minimal entry standards."¹⁷ The Canadian Human Rights Act recognizes that there are Universality of Service requirements for the CAF, and applicants (male or female) must meet the minimum entry-level standards for enrolment. This includes medical, fitness and aptitude levels, and performance standards are not compromised for females in order to reach SSE goals.¹⁸

Recruitment

8. The CAF is heavily focused on recruitment, of both males and females, as it is committed to growing from 96,500 to 101,500 personnel.¹⁹ The CDS issued Operation GENERATION, a standing domestic operation to address issues with CAF attraction, recruitment and application processes. Additionally, the EE goals for minority groups were highlighted in Op GENERATION.²⁰ Despite all this attention given to recruitment, the efforts have yielded little success. Female enrolment rate for FY 2017/2018 was 17.2%, and enrollment rate decreased by 0.1% for FY 2018/2019 and was 17.1%.²¹

https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/cnap-pnac/implementation_plans-plans_mise_oeuvre-2017-2022-dnd.aspx?lang=eng.

¹⁴ Directorate of Human Rights and Discrimination, "Canadian Armed Forces Employment Equity Statistics."

¹⁵ Department of National Defence, "Canadian Armed Forces Employment Equity Report" (Canadian Armed Forces, 2019/2018), 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Government of Canada, "2018-2019 Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces Departmental Progress Report for Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security," accessed February 2, 2021, https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/cnap-pnac/progress_reports-rapports_etapes-2018-2019-dnd.aspx?lang=eng.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Government of Canada, "Strong Secured Engaged Canada's Defence Policy," 13.

²⁰ Canadian Armed Forces Chief of Defence Staff, "Joint CDS/DM Directive: OPERATION GENERATION" (Department of National Defence, May 28, 2018).

²¹ Government of Canada, "2018-2019 Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces Departmental Progress Report for Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security."

Numerically speaking, 896 women joined the CAF in 2018/2019.²² This data indicates that recruitment and enrollment of females into the CAF is still a challenge.

9. As previously mentioned, the SSE initiative of higher female representation in the CAF is a goal and not a quota, and special treatment will not be given to females applying to the forces. However, the Canadian Forces Recruiting Group Headquarters (CFRG HQ) conducted priority processing and selection for women applicants.²³ CFRG HQ established EE specific processing control lines and female applicants receive priority booking for processing appointments. Concerning selection, CFRG HQ carried out priority selection of female applicants in the past three years.²⁴ This initiative resulted in an increase in female enrollments from 775 in FY 16/17, to 860 in FY 17/18, and 896 in FY 18/19.²⁵ This data displays promising results for the SSE goal of increased female representation.

10. An online application process dominates CAF recruitment. Accordingly, the CAF recruitment website (Forces.ca) has been revitalized. The Assistant Deputy Minister (PA) developed occupational videos with a focus on EE to support the recruiting efforts of DMG.²⁶ The Forces.ca website also features videos of women performing their jobs and providing testimonials as to why they love their work in the CAF.²⁷ Additionally, a 'Women in the CAF' page was added to the Forces.ca website and it highlights the history of females serving Canada.²⁸ These are all very good improvements to the Forces.ca website and should aid in the SSE goal of increased female representation.

11. Military Personnel Command initiated several women-focused campaigns with good success. For instance, a recruiting center in Quebec started a successful Instagram account "Soeurs en Armes."²⁹ The CAF participated in an "Ask Me Anything" campaign on the Forces.ca and Canada.ca websites. This digital engagement opportunity increased the visibility and awareness of the CAF being a realistic and appealing employer of choice for Canadian women.³⁰ The Regular Officer Training Plan (ROTP) recruiting brochures now feature more images of women, and this package is distributed across Canada and is shown during attraction activities and academic fairs.³¹ Furthermore, CFRG HQ continues to maintain a communications campaign with high schools across Canada and focusing on recruiting females.³²

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Government of Canada, "Women in the Forces."

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Government of Canada, "2018-2019 Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces Departmental Progress Report for Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security."

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

12. The CAF has historically promoted being a gender-neutral institution. However, an organization that is 84% male naturally defaults to having a culture through the lens of the male perspective. This may have unknowingly affected female recruitment into the CAF. In recognition of this, the CAF has allowed for more diversity and gender expression in some of the dress policy and regulations. For instance, starting in 2018 females in the CAF are allowed to wear a ponytail while in uniform, and this is a very positive and gender inclusive improvement made by the CAF.

Retention

13. In order to improve female retention in the CAF it is necessary to discuss the attrition rate of women voluntarily leaving the military. In FY 2017/2018 the attrition rate for females was 15.2%, and 12.8% the following year in 2018/2019.³³ There was a decrease in attrition in FY 18/19 for both Regular Force Officers and NCM, 2% and 1% respectively.³⁴ Males and females have similar attrition rates throughout their careers, however, at 20 years of service (YOS) and beyond the attrition rate for women is noticeably higher.³⁵ Additionally, medical attrition has been higher for women, and in the three year period between 2017-2019 just over 50% of female releases have been for medical reasons.³⁶ The exact cause of the high percentage of medical releases is unknown, and research into this matter is required.

14. The CAF Exit Survey (2013-2017) provided some insight into why women leave the CAF. There were differences between genders for leaving the military, males reported geographical stability more than females as a reason for leaving. Females reported *lack of fit with military lifestyle* more often than men did as a reason for leaving.³⁷ There is confusion surrounding '*lack of fit with military lifestyle*', and further research is required to clarify what this release category actually means for females.

15. Understanding female attrition is an important aspect of increasing women in the CAF. However, there still needs to be a strategy to prevent attrition and retain the already trained and talented women in uniform. The last Retention Strategy was published in 2009,³⁸ and SSE communicated an initiative to develop and implement a comprehensive Retention Strategy.³⁹ SSE was published in 2017, and unfortunately, the updated CAF Retention Strategy has yet to be released and is projected to be published in the summer 2021 timeframe.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Nicholas Bremner, Kelsea Beadman, and Glenn Budgell, "CAF Exit Survey - Descriptive Analyses of 2013-2017 Data," October 2017, 6.

³⁸ Bremner, Beadman, and Budgell, "CAF Exit Survey - Descriptive Analyses of 2013-2017 Data."

³⁹ Government of Canada, "Strong Secured Engaged Canada's Defence Policy," 22.

CONCLUSION

16. After reviewing the available data on the status of female representation in the CAF (16.1% representation for January 2021, 17.1% enrollment for FY 2018/2019, and attrition at 12.8% of all releases in 2018/2019). These results are not favorable for achieving the SSE goal of 25% female by 2026. There is growth happening for female representation in the CAF, but not at the desired rate outlined in SSE. It is imperative that the CAF continues recruiting efforts with a focus on female enrollment. It is also vitally important that the CAF dedicate resources towards the exit process to understand why women are leaving.

17. The risk of not achieving 25% female representation in the CAF by 2026 is concerning. However, a greater concern surrounds the SSE goal of growing the CAF to 101,500 and if female representation percentage does not increase with this growth. There is the potential for the gender gap to widen if continued attention to female recruitment and retention is not maintained.

18. The impact to the CAF of not attaining 25% female by 2026 is substantial and expands beyond the CAF wanting to be an employer of choice for Canadians. There is the risk that the CAF will not reflect the citizens it serves and in turn influences legitimacy and credibility of the institution. The most significant risk the CAF faces by not increasing the female representation is that of operational effectiveness. The climate of domestic and international operations requires CAF members to interact with local populations and host nation forces.⁴⁰ Conflict can influence affected populations in various ways. Therefore, the CAF must have members with adequate skillsets to deal with vulnerable and diverse populations.⁴¹ To ensure mission success it would be important to have both male and female representatives to interact with affected people. Some sections of a host nation population may have difficulty interfacing with a predominantly male military force.⁴² This highlights the importance of deploying women (of all rank levels) on operations, and how female participation contributes to mission success.

⁴⁰ Government of Canada, "2018-2019 Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces Departmental Progress Report for Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security."

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

19. To improve female recruitment, it is recommended that the CAF modernize the digital campaign to include a YouTube channel displaying women in uniform in a more natural and honest way. It is also recommended that social media be used beyond Facebook and Twitter to include a specific Instagram account that displays women in the CAF. Relying on updated websites with embedded videos are wonderful tools and they work well when a person is already interested in joining the military. The use of YouTube and Instagram are ways to build curiosity and attract people to the military who may not deliberately go to the Forces.ca website to gather information.

20. It is recommended that the CAF implement detailed release interviews that would be conducted in conjunction with the exit survey. Leaving the military is a significant decision, at any stage in a person's career, and the CAF should treat it so. It is vitally important to understand and document reasons for attrition. There is valuable data to be collected that can assist in increasing females in the military. This approach would have the secondary effect of having people leave the military on a positive note, or a chance to communicate any frustrations.

21. It is recommended that the CAF adopt a formalized telework policy. It is understood that this option would be position dependent and not always a realistic option for CAF members. However, throughout a member's career there would likely be the possibility of benefitting from this policy at some point. The exit survey noted that *lack of fit with military lifestyle* was one of the leading reason women were leaving the CAF. The option to telework affords greater flexibility and perhaps attrition rates would decrease with this increased flexibility particularly given the societal and family roles women play.

22. It is recommended that when the CAF Retention Strategy is released this year that each service create a specialized and modified strategy that targets their weaknesses and areas of improvement. Implementing any or some of the recommendations offered in this paper would assist in achieving the SSE's goal of 25% female representation by 2026.

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