

Defence Policy of Canada Review

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White Ribbon welcomes this opportunity to t input on the DND Policy Review, and in particular to bring a gender perspective to this review.

White Ribbon is the world’s largest movement of men and boys working to end violence against women and girls, promote gender equity, healthy relationships and a new vision of masculinity. We ask men to pledge to never commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women and girls. In the 25 years since it was started, White Ribbon has spread to over 60 countries.

We work to examine the root causes of gender-based violence and create a cultural shift that helps bring us to a future without violence. Our vision is for a masculinity that embodies the best qualities of being human. We believe that men are part of the solution and part of a future that is safe and equitable for all people.

Our contribution to the review is less around operational military matters, (however UN Resolution 1325 is a critical gender issue for all armed forces) and more around gender equality, inclusion, and eliminating sexual harassment and misconduct in the CAF. We recently conducted a training for leadership at the Infantry School for CDSB Gagetown on these very issues.

It is well known that organizational diversity contributes to better policy, program development, operations, public consultations, services, and workplace conditions. (Women’s Leadership Matters, 2016). Inclusion of women and gender perspectives does not ruin cohesion or military culture. In fact, “adding women to combat units, and a gender perspective to military operations more generally, has the potential to add new capabilities and thereby also improve the effectiveness of operations.” (Gender Perspectives and Military Effectiveness)

Canada is seen as a global leader on updating standards and implementing programs aimed at improving the conditions and operations of the Canadian Armed Forces. As an institution that is not afraid to challenge tradition to make appropriate adjustments, the CAF is uniquely positioned to tackle the difficult mission of creating a truly safer and more inclusive workplace.

“Discipline, loyalty, strength, obedience, ‘warrior mindset,’ and unit cohesion are just some aspects of this ethos that may sound arcane or even worrying to some civilians, but that from a professional military perspective are considered absolutely necessary for the effective application of violence in the midst of war.” (Gender Perspectives and Military Effectiveness). It isn’t gender that determines cohesion or military efficacy, but training and competence. As long as every member of the organization is well trained, there is no evidence that a diversified team has any impact on the effectiveness of a military unit.

In 1993, the United Nations General Assembly defined gender-based violence (GBV) as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women.” In real terms this includes violence in domestic and inter-personal relationships; many forms of sexual violence including rape and sexual assault; systemic, institutional and culture based forms of violence; and new emerging forms of harassment and stalking based in modern technology.

The root causes of gender-based violence can almost exclusively be narrowed down to two things; the fundamental condition of gender inequality for women, and the violence, harmful and controlling aspects of masculinities which are the result of patriarchal imbalances.

There is a much broader spectrum of positive roles for men and boys to play than perpetrator or potential perpetrator of gender-based violence. These roles not only prevent and reduce violence against women and promote gender equality, but also improve the lives of men and boys by freeing them from these harmful and limiting aspects of masculinities.

There are many access points the Canadian Armed Forces can utilize with men on the positive role that they can play in ending all forms of violence against women – through education, policy, awareness-raising, outreach, capacity building, partnerships and creative campaigns. White Ribbon is helping create tools, strategies and models that challenge negative, outdated concepts of manhood and inspire men to understand and embrace the incredible potential they have to be a part of positive change.

There are also many challenges to incorporating GBV prevention in the military. How do we rationalize training soldiers to fight and kill with non-violent strategies for de-escalation; unravelling centuries of use of homophobia and sexism as training and conditioning tools; deconstructing a highly masculine environment, that is deeply ingrained before individuals join the CAF are just a few.

These harmful gender norms and attitudes are programmed at a very young age so that the men and women joining the Canadian Armed Forces come loaded with attitudes and behaviours that might not contribute to a healthy environment. The CAF has a dual role to play in combating unhealthy masculinity that can lead to a violent and unhealthy workplace and promoting gender equality within its ranks. Gender transformative programming in training for all personnel and finding opportunities for engagement with Canadians at-large to promote healthy masculinity, deep culture change to address unique contexts in the military, and sustained, committed equity initiatives are all part of the solution.

It is important to use a positive and strength-based approach to engage men and women to identify strategies they can use in their everyday life which will enable them to build equal and respectful relationships. Using the strength-based approach, we can challenge language and behaviours, as well as harmful ideas of manhood that lead to violence.

Working on prevention with men and boys is necessary. As perpetrators, the target audience for primary prevention, as holders of the social norms and influencers on other men, men must be engaged to reduce and prevent gender-based violence, as leaders and peers, men also have the potential to make transformative change in a way we have not fully maximized.

Working with men and boys can be effective. As the evidence base grows, evaluation data appears, lessons are learned, and best practices are shared, we know this may be the missing compliment to past decades of work.

Operation Honour is a tremendous first step in developing policy and protocol to tackle issues of sexual misconduct within the CAF. While Operation Honour's victim support strategies are absolutely vital, more must be done on violence prevention – the challenging of dangerous attitudes and behaviours prevalent within the institutional culture.

A culture of safety and inclusion is important for the recruitment and retention of all genders within the Canadian Armed Forces. Especially if the CAF is reach its goal of 25% female personnel. While it is imperative to have policy and strategic priorities like Operation Honour, in order to really affect change in the CAF, the process needs to be about primary prevention and engaging men on the role that they can play and doing the deep culture change that necessitates.

What is abundantly clear is that gender equity and violence prevention programming cannot be run autonomously – they need to be mainstreamed in all operations and programs.