

Women in the Canadian Forces: Past, Present and Future

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ABSTRACT

This presentation provides a brief history of women's service in Canada's military. From the North West Rebellion in the Indian Territories in 1885 to the 1980's trials a century later, women's military roles have become one of full inclusion. Roles remained virtually identical until 1978. Numbers have fluctuated considerably. The final results of the trials were pre-empted by a Canadian Human Rights Tribunal of 1989 that directed the Canadian Forces (CF) to remove all remaining employment restrictions based on gender, expecting those applicable to service in the current submarines. Today, the integration of women is being actively pursued in a Nine Point Plan to Increase the Participation of Women in the Canadian Forces The Nine Point Plan is reviewed in detail.

In 1990, the Minister's Advisory Board on Women in the CF was established (later the Minister's Advisory Board on Gender Integration in the CF (MABGICF), to provide an external monitoring function. Inasmuch as the MABGICF is mandated only until 1999, the CF must be equipped to assume full responsibility for the monitoring function before that date. Accordingly, a process for complementary operation of the internal and external monitoring functions is now being delineated.

The presentation concludes with a perspective on the future.

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Canadian women have been defending their country since 1885 during the north west rebellion in the Indian territories. Little did they know then they would be part of the battle which marked the first use of the machine gun by Canadian troops, and the last use of the bow and arrow in conflict.

By the end of world war II, 45,691 women had joined Canada's various services. They were primarily employed in the administration, communications, logistics and medical support roles. However, the period from 1946 to 1950 saw an almost complete demobilization of service women. All that remained were 80 nursing sisters.

With the beginning of the Korean war, women were again recruited into the services. The employment reflected what was then seen as appropriate work for women; clerical, medical, support and communications in relatively clean, dry, warm static units. Little thought seems to have been given to the development of careers for women, since the assumption was made that women would marry and have children, and would cease to be available for military service.

A study on the utility of continued employment of women in the Canadian forces was ordered in the early sixties. As a result of this study, the defence council decided that women would continue to be employed in the services but that the total number be limited to 1,500 which represented 1.5% of the forces. Women were still forbidden from service with combat arms units, at remote locations and at sea. By 1967, 19% of all military occupations were open to women.

The real change in the status of women within the Canadian forces had its beginnings in the 1970s with the tabling of the report by the royal commission on the status of women. Its recommendations began the process of the broader inclusion of women in the Canadian forces. By 1974, 67% of all military occupations were open to women. By 1977 there were 4,405 service women or 5.6% of the total force.

The Canadian human rights act was passed in 1978 which forbade discrimination on grounds including sex. This precipitated a change in thinking within the upper echelons of the Canadian forces and led to the running of two trials tailored to identifying the potential benefits and limitations of women serving in a greater range of military duties. These were service women in non-traditional environments and roles (swinter) and combat related employment of women (crew). Of particular interest were occupations deemed "non-traditional" such as infanteer, sailor and pilot.

In february 1989 a Canadian human rights tribunal ordered all obstacles be removed to the integration of women into all military occupations and roles. The sole exception was service in the Canadian forces' current submarines. It further ordered that complete integration was to be achieved by 1999. An external monitoring agency known as the minister's advisory board on gender integration in the Canadian forces has reported to the minister of national defence on an annual basis since the tribunal's decision. It provides observations and recommendations on the Canadian forces' progress towards full gender integration.

To ensure action on the advisory board's recommendations and to guarantee a maintenance of gender integration beyond the tribunal's 1999 deadline, the chief of defence staff established the "ad hoc committee on the increased participation of women in the Canadian forces" in the fall of 1994. This committee has since established and begun the implementation of a series of initiatives towards ensuring that the Canadian forces attracts and retains a larger number of women in its ranks. There are nine initiatives which are known as the "nine point plan". They include:

- * affirmation of commitment to gender integration from Canadian forces leadership (communications plan development (explain requirement for information on developments to get to field)
- * gender awareness education (explain that old habits die hard and even though most of think we are aware there is too much "i didn't know, i didn't know");
- * trend analysis to identify systemic barriers (such as anomalies in rank progression, engagement methods, evaluation comparisons, etc);
- * improving geographical (posting) stability (with the cost of living and the number of spouses in the work force, more stability is required);
- * facilitating discharge of family obligations (such as child and elderly parent care programs)(these are major dissatisfiers that disrupt family life if not resolved);
- * modifying recruiting methods (how can service life be made more attractive to women);
- * developing a mentoring system (leaders have to become more active in developing the talents of their subordinates);
- * evaluating establishment positions with respect to operation versus support necessity (most senior positions are classified as operator positions but as most women are in the support occupations there is little opportunity for them to advance because of lack of positions for support occupations); and
- * networking with other government departments and civilian businesses to ensure internal human resource practices are current and valid.

We believe that by educating the leaders at all levels through awareness programs, by ferreting out the systemic barriers and improving the quality of life issues that affect both men and women each day we can further the progress of gender integration.

In 1991, 240 servicewomen participated in the Persian Gulf crisis thus representing 6.7% of the Canadian forces' contingent. As of July 1995 there were 14,229 serving women in the Canadian forces representing 11% and 22% of the regular and primary reserve forces respectively. These women are serving in all aspects of Canadian forces operations including United Nations' peacekeeping activities. In September 1995, the first international military sports council world games was held in Rome. 4,545 military athletes competed in various sports from some 86 countries. The Canadian contingent was made up of 139 athletes of which 20.1% were female. Internationally females made up 10.3% of the total participation. From this it would suggest that women are well on their way to equally representing their countries regardless of the task.

There still exists, however, archaic attitudes with respect to women being able to cope with the rigours of military life including the old adage that women do not have the physical strength and stamina to compete with their male counterparts. Men and women are different and thank goodness for that. We think

differently, we work differently but the truth of the matter is we both still get the job done regardless of the technique used or the strength capability.

As for Canada, we are just over midway in our ten year mandate to full gender integration. Down-sizing has not yet had an appreciable impact on the numbers of women. Policies are in place which formally address gender issues and the nine point plan is addressing the cultural barriers within the department. While there is still much to be done, progress is steady and demonstrates the Canadian forces' commitment to the spirit and intent of employment equity.