POLICY PERSPECTIVE

FACILITATING CHANGE: RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION IN THE ARMED FORCES

by Tara Zammit

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Across Western militaries, there is a repeated set of challenges when it comes to integrating women and other diverse bodies, and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is not immune from this. Charlotte Duval-Lantoine’s book, *The Ones We Let Down*, highlighted these challenges in the 1989 to 1999 period known as the “decade of darkness,” but in many ways, the darkness persists. In fact, the Arbour Report identified that “One of the dangers of the model under which the CAF continues to operate is the high likelihood that some of its members are more at risk of harm, on a day to day basis, from their comrades than from the enemy.”

Grappling with the notion that an institution designed to protect its citizens is struggling to achieve that goal is incredibly difficult and complex. Coupled with this are challenges related to recruitment, retention, integration and inclusion which have contributed to an often unwelcoming space for diverse personnel.

This piece argues that to implement productive, integrative, and inclusive policy changes more successfully, leadership needs to take greater accountability for culture change, personnel need to be at the centre and buzzwords/phrases need to be given real meaning by putting them into practice. This problem is not unique to the Canadian context and so a comparative approach will be taken throughout to emphasize the overlaps between the issues facing Canada and its allies, and to identify some examples of what the situation looks like in these allied contexts.

**What’s Gone Wrong?**

The CAF’s Operation HONOUR was announced in 2015 following a series of revelations surrounding sexual misconduct, bullying and harassment in the armed forces. Gen. Jonathan Vance, former chief of Defence Staff, and the person who launched Operation HONOUR, affirmed that “any form of harmful sexual behaviour has been and always will be absolutely contrary to good order and discipline” in the CAF. This commitment was undermined when Vance himself came under investigation for sexual misconduct, eventually pleading guilty to obstruction of justice in the case against him. It is unclear how any institution can expect to maintain credibility and reputational legitimacy when its own leadership says one thing and does another, particularly when that contradiction places the health and well-being of personnel at risk. These inconsistencies emerge in part from what Duval-Lantoine identifies as a culture of toxic and disengaged leadership which stalls or even impedes culture change at various levels.

Without strong, engaged and responsible leaders to emulate, change is going to be extremely difficult. Unfortunately, Canada’s allies face similar problems.
Allied Perspectives on the Problem

In a recent CGAI webinar, I was fortunate to be part of a panel discussion with Professor Megan MacKenzie and Kayla Williams, which explored allied perspectives on leadership, integration and inclusion, among other subjects. The topics of recruitment and retention were central to our discussion, particularly as all three of our respective case studies – Megan on Australia, Kayla on the United States and my research on the U.K. – suffer from similar issues when it comes to misconstruct and attracting and retaining new and diverse talent.

When discussing the importance of leadership, Megan mentioned the case of Ben Roberts-Smith, Australia’s most decorated veteran, as one example highlighting leadership failings. This corporal, idolized for his leadership and awarded the Victoria Cross for his service, recently lost his defamation case against several newspaper outlets that accused him of war crimes committed during his service in Afghanistan.

We reached similar conclusions that although defence representatives and relevant policy personnel reiterate that we need more data to better understand the extent of the problem, this is an oversimplification of the circumstances, and in the U.S. and U.K. contexts at least, not wholly accurate. In fact, as Kayla and I argue in our particular contexts, there is a plethora of data to work with and this can obscure pathways to solution development given that there is so much material to sift through and analyze. For example, the U.K. publishes and makes available the Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey, UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics and the Quarterly Service Personnel Statistics, to name a few. These, alongside reports such as Protecting Those Who Protect Us and the Wigston Review into Inappropriate Behaviours are extremely valuable resources for understanding, at least quantitatively, where some of these issues lie. To better address them, we need to consider the findings in greater qualitative depth.

This leads to a perception that the willingness to engage constructively with the data is somewhat lacking, as we are presented with reports indicating that “the findings show x,” but often find that there are inefficient or ineffective implementations of measurable outcomes. Developing an earlier point from Kayla, Megan noted in our discussion that there is a “disconnect between the commitments or the stated commitments around equity, diversity and inclusion and the concerns around recruitment and the failures to connect the dots on those issues.”

What Now? Recommendations for Moving Forward

Prioritize People

One key area of concern that appears in the U.K. context is that many personnel feel their experiences are undervalued and underappreciated. For example, in the 2022 edition of the U.K.’s Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey, “less than four in ten (37%) personnel feel valued by their Service.” To begin addressing this issue, it seems clear that engaging with personnel directly and consistently should be a first step. My PhD research aims to take this approach, exploring the
experiences of personnel to find out what changes could be made to make their service safer, to help them feel more supported and ultimately, to feel more fulfilled by their role. Thus far, these core issues have either been largely ignored or subsumed within broader statistical reports, which fails to prioritize peoples’ feelings and experiences, and does little to incentivize them to stay or feel that they are being taken seriously.

Therefore, my first recommendation is to incorporate more fully the needs and recommendations of personnel in the space, and to do so at regular intervals. In the British context and on the experiences of female personnel, Protecting Those Who Protect Us was the biggest survey of its kind when completed, but reports of this nature need to be updated and regularly reflected upon in order to make sure that targets are met, the voices of service members are heard and their needs are being addressed efficiently and effectively. Otherwise, we risk falling into the patterns of decades past.

In her new book on media coverage of military sexual violence, 2023’s Good Soldiers Don’t Rape, Megan explains that “calls for more evidence” are a form of rhetorical tool which “can serve to convince the public that inaction or waiting for action is justified until more evidence is collected.” Based on our webinar conversation and research, it is not wholly sufficient to say that there is a need for more comprehensive data or that the problem is less than well understood because (1) we have a magnitude of data that demonstrates the toxic culture and the breadth and depth of misconduct in the CAF and elsewhere; and (2) there are constant reiterations of reports which emphasize similar concerns and similar approaches to dealing with them. This shows that we have plenty of material with which to work, and in fact, we need to get started.

Published in 2020, The Path to Dignity and Respect: The Canadian Armed Forces Strategy to Address Sexual Misconduct (“The Path”) makes it clear that it “is a culture change strategy designed to prevent and address sexual misconduct” [emphasis added]. Just three years later, however, the website for The Path states that “a new strategy designed to address all forms of systemic misconduct, including sexual misconduct,” is in development. What will lead this strategy to be successful compared to previous efforts like Operation HONOUR, the Arbour Report, The Path and others remains to be seen.

In light of the failures of Operation HONOUR, the scandals surrounding Vance and his successor, Admiral Art McDonald and the subsequent 2021 resignation of Lt.-Col. Eleanor Taylor, it has perhaps never been more apparent that the time for excuses is past. Policymakers and the defence sector as a whole must move towards sustained preventative measures to start changing institutional behavioural patterns, but this can only happen when people are put first in terms of education, standards and respect.

*Banish Buzzwords*

What does it mean when we hear terms like “zero tolerance” used in the context of defence? This term came up repeatedly in the contexts we discussed during the CGAI webinar and is essentially meaningless without proper definition and commitment to implementing that definition in practice. In the British context, the Ministry of Defence introduced its Zero Tolerance Policy on
sexual offences in spring 2022. According to the accompanying press release, it “sends a clear signal to everyone in the Armed Forces that these offences will not be tolerated.”

However, a quick online search of the term reveals its usage over a decade ago, emphasizing the lack of clarity and commitment on the subject as a policy tool. In November 2012, a BBC article recording a letter written by Maj.-Gen. John Lorimer and leaked to Channel 4 found that “every one of 400 female soldiers questioned during an Army investigation said they had received ‘unwanted sexual attention’ during their career.” In the same article, a Ministry of Defence spokesperson states: “The British army has a zero tolerance approach to all forms of harassment, bullying and discrimination” [emphasis added].

This same language appears in The Path, as one of the document’s “guiding principles” is a zero tolerance approach to sexual misconduct. But what does this mean in practice? As Megan noted separately in a 2021 interview, “zero tolerance” language appears over decades of policy planning but “you have protracted media coverage of this issue and you see a number of articles go out, [...] and then it kind of dies down.” Megan makes a similar assessment in a chapter on “Rhetorical Tools”, where she emphasises how zero tolerance language is “used consistently over time to persuade” the public in Australia, Canada and the U.S. about the institutions’ stance on inappropriate behaviours. These “tools”, however, do not necessarily connect to change in practice.

Given the lack of clarity around their meaning, my second recommendation is for defence advisers and relevant policy figures to move away from buzzwords or phrases (“rhetorical tools”) like zero tolerance, which have effectively lost significant weight over the years, as substantiated by Megan’s work. We need to design, implement and measure the effectiveness of policies that truly are “zero tolerance” in practice to show that justice is being provided to those wronged parties and to begin rebuilding faith in the system’s ability to protect personnel. This will take education, training and commitment across the services we discussed.

Conclusions

We must begin to include service personnel in integration and inclusion work, incorporating their views and insights more thoroughly into policy-making processes, for example. Otherwise, we will continue to see the same types of recommendations, the repeated creation of new reports and strategies and disappointingly, we will fail to see sustained, positive culture shifts in the CAF and in other allied defence and security spaces.

There is often a tension between what militaries say they hope to achieve when it comes to integration and addressing incidences of repeated misconduct, and what is actually pursued in practice. This is one of the central tenets in my doctoral research on the British Armed Forces: how we can better conceptualize, navigate and ultimately overcome this tension through using different analytical frames, like ontological security and feminist security studies, and by bringing the voices of personnel and policymakers to the centre of our discussions and planning. I remain...
 unconvinced that the military is a wholly irredeemable space when it comes to integrating less traditional bodies; it is, however, a space that requires adaptation to support those who seek to contribute to it.

Culture change takes time and continuous efforts, and as Charlotte, Megan, Kayla and I have emphasized, it won’t happen without leadership on board to embed and embody these patterns and behaviours. My recommendations are relatively simple and perhaps seem obvious, but that in itself highlights one of the key problems I have sought to reiterate throughout: we have the data, but we simply aren’t using it to its fullest; we have the people who are interested and who have the potential to be successful, but they are left on the fringes. By bringing the experiences and voices of personnel to the fore and moving away from talk to measurable, sustained action, perhaps the CAF and other Western militaries can begin to more effectively make the changes they desperately need to eliminate patterns of misconduct and to incentivize people to join defence and stay for the long haul.
About the Author

*Tara Zammit* is a PhD Candidate in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. She has been awarded the SSHRC-CRSH Department of National Defence MINDS Initiative Doctoral Award to undertake her research. Tara’s project is situated within the fields of ontological security, feminist security studies, and war studies. Tara is a member of the Leadership Team for Women in Defence UK, a RUSI NextGen Ambassador, and volunteers with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.
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