



# Policy Brief

November 2021

Volume 7, Issue 6

## A Framework for Mentoring Women in the CAF:

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Mentorship fulfills two main functions: psychosocial development and career development, which can be viewed as the most immediate or short term goals of mentorship.<sup>1</sup> The military is characterized by shared experiences of life within a distinct culture marked by its own practices, attitudes, beliefs, language, traditions and values.<sup>2</sup> For women in the military, not only are they functioning within their respective professional cultures (e.g., military culture, police culture), they are also faced with an overlay of the culture of masculinity. In 2020, the CAF is made up of approximately 16 percent women. Although there are more and more women joining the CAF it is not unrealistic to assume the dominance of a masculinity and the subsequent challenges faced by many women within the culture. This study proposes the Framework for Women Mentorship in the Canadian Armed Forces (FWM-CAF) to ensure continued support and fulfillment throughout a career in the CAF.

This study included a scoping review of the mentorship literature and interviews with subject matter experts as well as mentors and mentees within the CAF. The findings of the scoping review informed the approach taken in the analysis of the interviews. In total, 28 individuals were involved in the study including 21 women and 7 men from across Canada with representation from all elements of the CAF, Canadian Defence Academy, Canadian and international Veterans, and non-for-profit Canadian organization working with women in defence and security. Critical Incident Technique<sup>3</sup> was used to inform the English-language interview questions and data was analyzed in accordance with Hsieh and Shannon<sup>4</sup> with a focus on the specific career and psychosocial functions of mentorship. This study was funded by the Canadian Defence and Security Network with support from the Centre for International and Defence Policy at Queen's University and the Canadian Armed Forces .

### Key results of the study

In general, women participants felt that the CAF did not prioritize mentoring or building a mentoring culture and instead saw mentoring as something that leadership should also engage in, with little training or emphasis on how they should go about it. Some participants felt that given the amount of training that members participate in as their careers progress, that formal training and education,

research funded by:



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International and Defence Policy

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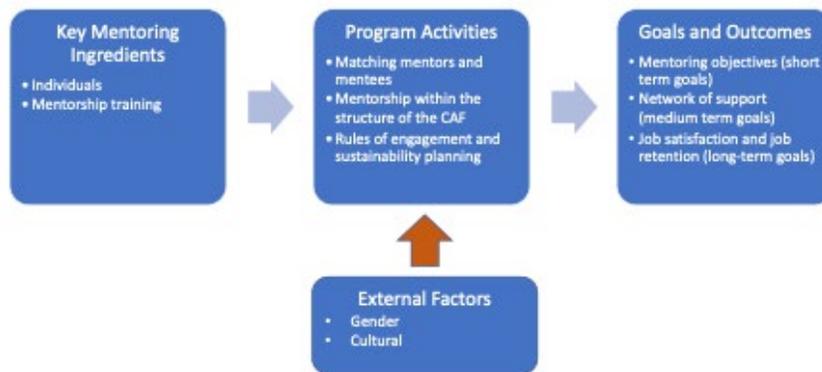
particularly around mentorship for women is a missed opportunity. However, creating a mentoring culture must be done carefully in military institutions. Cultural differences across elements and how people from certain military cultural subgroups interact with one another in both formal and informal situations was another consideration for mentorship programs, as well as considerations of conflict of interest in the Chain of Command relationship.

As identified in the literature on mentoring, psychosocial support is an important outcome of the mentoring relationship. A range of psychosocial themes were the subject of mentoring conversations including: balancing work activities with family responsibilities; the fit and function of uniforms and/or equipment; and enduring and surviving military sexual misconduct. Women in the study who identified as having family responsibilities described talking to their woman mentors (or wishing they had woman mentors to speak to) about a range of family related issues such wearing uniforms during pregnancy or managing absences due to training or deployments. The challenges of balancing work and family were the subject of much discussion during mentoring. Navigating military culture more generally as a woman and receiving gender specific advice was also helpful to the participants. Women participants often found the connection that they felt with other servicemembers was deepened by having other women to confide in. Many of the interview participants, shared that satisfaction with their careers and dedication to the CAF can be partially attributed to their positive mentoring experiences. Mid- to late-career mentor participants as well as some of the Veteran participants, described how their positive experiences of being a mentee inspired them to 'give back' and become mentors themselves. Being rising military leaders, participants eagerly shared stories of receiving support and advice from their mentors on how to become effective mentors themselves.

The interviews revealed a variety of ways which mentors and mentees connect with one another including meeting in person in the community or in workplace, and regularly scheduled telephone calls. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings that would typically be occurring in-person have shifted with relative ease to on-line, virtual platforms. For many of the participants who have had long standing relationships with their mentors/mentees, the nature of military life, characterized by regular relocations and/or deployments, means they have relied on technology to maintain their mentoring relationships. Participants had many suggestions for how to create frameworks for lasting programs with strong communication structures, these suggestions are a key part of the FWM-CAF.

### **Framework for Women Mentorship in the Canadian Armed Forces**

The Structure of the FWM-CAF was informed by the literature on structured mentorship programs.<sup>5</sup> The FWM-CAF states *inputs*, *program activities*, *outcomes/products*, and *context/constraints* to ensure that the programs goals and expectations are clear to all those involved. *Inputs* are factors that contribute to a mentoring program such as the participants, resources (materials and time), and training. *Program activities* are the actions that the mentorship program engages in, including recruitment and opportunities for participants to connect. The *outcomes* are the results of activity for participants, be they attitudinal, behavioural, or skills based and are organized as being proximal (immediate), enabling (intermediate), and distal (final). *Constraints* are the processes or resources that may facilitate or inhibit the effectiveness of the identified program activities. Figure 1 shows how *inputs*, *program activities*, *outcomes/products*, and *context/constraints* play out in the FWM-CAF.



### **Inputs: Key Mentoring Ingredients**

- **Individuals:** Individuals involved include potential mentors and mentees, as well as those within the organization who support mentorship participants. In particular, the Chain of Command and others in military leadership can facilitate and contribute to the mentorship of women.
- **Mentorship training:** Mentorship training and education should be delivered separately from leadership and development training and could be delivered at multiple points in the military career including at the Canadian Forces Staff College. The focus should be not only developing mentors and mentees, but also on developing personnel within the organization who support mentoring relationships.<sup>6</sup>

### **Program Activities**

- **Processes of matching mentors and mentees:** A reliable process of matching participants that ensures that they are well-suited for one another is required. Matching could be based on various individual factors such as service element, geographic location, and profession, with facilitated introductions by coordinators. A mentorship program coordinator could potentially have knowledge (or awareness of) cultural differences across elements and environments in order to match successfully. For mentoring programs with no capacity for an in-depth matching process, innovative approaches such as speed mentoring events have been tried which can also help match mentors and mentees for the future.<sup>7</sup>
- **Mentorship within the structure of the CAF:** Conflict of interest is a real potential issue when orders and promotions are given to the same individuals who may also disclose personal challenges or seek career advice that comes out during a mentoring session. This unfortunate reality prompted many of the study's participants to suggest that any real mentoring activities need to occur outside of the Chain of Command. Such mentoring relationships must be acknowledged and sanctioned by the CAF to address possible concerns of undermining or threat to a unit's leadership.
- **Rules of engagement and sustainability:** Mentorship programs need to have defined opportunities to allow mentors and mentees to engage with one another. Activities could be structured with minimum time commitments or numbers of interactions whether

face-to-face or telephone or over email. For longevity, annual reports and knowledge translations for future program iterations, as well as ways to transition new program participants are key elements for the structure of the program.<sup>8</sup>

### **Goals and Outcomes**

- Mentoring objectives (short term goals): Mentorship is a lifelong journey and has career development benefits, however, there are gaps in providing members with knowledge and education on mentorship in the military. Participants often turned to mentors for career advice, and especially sought women mentors to help them with those aspects of military life they thought men would not understand. Mentors sought out lower ranking women mentees in order to impart knowledge, demonstrating a willingness to engage in mentorship already exists in circles of military women.
- Network of support (medium term goals): For many women participants, mentorship provided them with a network of support built upon trust and grounded on the shared experiences of being a woman in the military. A support system that exists outside of the Chain of Command and one that validates gendered experiences within the military culture can help provide psychosocial support and career development. The function of mentorship also serves to amplify the voices of women as women within the military culture.
- Job satisfaction and job retention (long term goals): Long term goals such as job satisfaction and job retention are typically the main objectives of any mentorship program, especially for programs aimed at supporting women in the military. As previously indicated, providing support to subordinates is an expectation as one progresses through the military, but participants wanted more formalized systems. Participants with positive experiences as a mentee made choices to become mentors, despite at times, the lack of support from their unit leadership.

### **Constraints and Externalities**

- Gender: One of the questions posed to all the participants was their personal perceptions of a mentoring program developed to support the unique needs and experiences of women in the CAF. While most participants saw the potential positive effects of mentoring program for women, some participants did not view it as necessary and shared their concerns that men should also have opportunities to mentor women and vice versa. Arguments in support of a gender-specific mentoring program were largely grounded in the understanding that gender is a factor that colours the experiences of women during their careers in the CAF and constructs their roles and responsibilities in all other aspects of their lives.
- Culture: Gender has informed culturally ascribed roles for many of the women in the CAF. The dominance of gendered roles in broader Canadian society contributes an additional layer of constraint that is unique to serving women. There are also cultures within the military that are possible constraints on mentorship. While there are pockets of support for mentoring activities in the CAF, mentoring was largely seen as an extra-curricular activity in the experiences of the participants. Participants saw the CAF as falling short in mentoring activities and providing even less targeted mentoring support for women.

### **Implementation**

As noted above, mentorship is an important tool for recruitment and retention. In military organizations, there is increasing effort to discuss, create, and implement mentorship for specific populations that make up the minority such as racialized personnel, LGBTQ personnel, and women (Bhirugnath-Bhookhun & Kitada, 2017).<sup>9</sup> There is evidence that there are more conversations around the use of mentorship to support inclusivity efforts for ethnic and gender diversity.<sup>10</sup> The FWM-CAF provides a starting point for the creation of a mentorship framework to support women's psychosocial and career development within the CAF.

This study addresses a gap in knowledge about the mentorship experiences of women in the CAF, more specifically, understanding the role and impact of gender and culture on mentoring while informing the creation of a framework to support mentorship efforts. The findings of this current study will be disseminated to various stakeholders throughout the DND and CAF including the project sponsor, interview participants, defence scientists/researchers, and members of leadership via presentations and peer-reviewed publications.

### **Further Research**

To ensure the relevance of the content and structure of the FWM-CAF, additional work is currently being completed in a MINDS Targeted Engagement Grant (TEG) funded validation study. The validation study aims to determine if the proposed framework reflects the goals and objectives of organizational and unit mentorship, and whether or not the framework and accompanying materials will enhance mentorship experiences. The validation study will be reported in a subsequent policy brief. In addition, a pilot study of the FWM-CAF within an existing mentorship program for women in the CAF (or affiliate organizations) is being planned to determine the efficacy of supporting materials. Feedback from the pilot will continue to inform the development of the framework and resources.

More research can be done on the types of communities created through mentorship in military organizations, especially for populations that are a minority, or marginalized. How mentorship contributes to a community of support, and therefore facilitates career satisfaction and inclusion is a key finding that should be further validated.

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## Endnotes

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