

Proceedings Report

The Gender Dimension of Veteran Transition:
Workshop and Mentorship Program

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAT	Animal Assisted Therapy
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
CIDP	Centre for International and Defence Policy
CIMVHR	Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research
GBA+	Gender-Based Analysis Plus
HIT	Hero In Transition
MCT	Military to Civilian Transition
MST	Military Sexual Trauma
NCM	Non-Commissioned Member
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RTG	Research and Technology Group
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
VAC	Veterans Affairs Canada
VSP	Veteran Service Providers
WIIS-Canada	Women in International Security - Canada

Key Insights

Career transition services are important and there are opportunities for government program development

Identifying the transferable skills of veterans can aid with the professional transition process. However, these transferable skills may be more implicit, especially when a veteran comes from a combat role. There are opportunities for Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to bridge the gap between veterans, their former military life, and their future civilian life.

Awareness of the gendered implications of veteran transition has increased, and programs and services are beginning to consider these differences in practice.

Research has identified the differentiated transition experiences of men and women. For example, women tend to be medically released more, suffer more from mental health issues upon release, enjoy less financial stability. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+), a tool to analyse the differentiated impact of policies on different groups, has recently been implemented by the government of Canada, and there is an increasing number of government agencies that use it in order to assess policies.

Civil society and the private sector fill the gaps left by policies.

Although GBA+ is being applied more widely in the Veterans Affairs Canada context, gender-based programming is often led by NGOs or civil society. As a result, many Veteran Service Providers (VSP) and associations, revolve around establishing peer support networks and mentorship. The programs offer rehabilitation activities and provide long term therapy to veterans in transition.

Military to civilian transition (MCT) is a cultural transition.

One of the core difficulties of transition is that veterans exit a very specific culture to join another. For example, core military values include discipline, teamwork, and selfless duty, while civilian values put an emphasis on individualism and freedom. As these two different sets of values appear to be antithetic to a certain extent, MCT involves a profound change. This transition often provokes a culture shock and a certain loss of identity that need to be recognized and to be addressed, both on the military and the civilian sides.

Military families also experience challenges during transition.

Military to civilian transition also occurs for the support networks and families of veterans. The quality of veterans' transition requires service providers to also consider military families and their needs.

Policies need to be tailored.

Although research suggests that our understanding of MCT has improved, many gaps in policy remain, and a “one-size-fits-all” approach is still the norm. However, improvements are being made and a shift of discourse has occurred, with policies taking a “people first” outlook.

There are lessons and best practices to be learned from allies and partners regarding veteran transition.

Despite some differences for veteran transition between Canada, the United States, and NATO countries, research from Canada and the United States suggests that many of the challenges regarding military to civilian transition in Canada are also observed in the United States. This means that Canada can learn from best practices outside of its borders.

Opening Remarks

Meaghan Shoemaker, PhD candidate at Queen's University, opened the first day of the workshop. After welcoming the attendees and the participants, she emphasized the importance of such a workshop happening in Kingston, as it bridges the government, the private sector and university research, links the military with civilians, but also connects practice with theory. The participants in the workshop are scholars researching on the issue of veteran transition, servicemembers having gone through transition themselves, employees of the private sector working on assisting servicemembers' transition, members of civil society engaged in offering support to veterans, or public servants directly working on military to civilian transitions. The workshop henceforth serves to exchange knowledge and to inform practices. Meaghan Shoemaker also reiterated the central theme of the workshop: Mentorship. Mentorship is critical in the process of transitioning, as it allows for the sharing of best practices and creates strong networks of support, which can help alleviate significantly the anxiety of transitioning out of the military. This year, 20 women were matched for the mentorship program taking place the day following this workshop. This number doubled from last year and constitutes a source of hope the program will continue to expand for the years to come and will have a lasting impact on women veterans.

Dr. Stéphanie Bélanger, the Associate Scientific Director at the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) followed these preliminary remarks. After thanking the main proponents of the workshop, she emphasized on CIMVHR's concerns over the relationship between the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC). Unfortunately, the first victims of the fragile relationship and the lack of communication between the CAF and VAC are the servicemembers transitioning to civilian life. CIMVHR, to cope with this difficulty, works hard with government partners to advocate for the needs of transitioning servicemembers and veterans. To this complex process marked by a lack of inter-institutional coordination is added the issue of gender. The military is a male-dominated and highly masculine institution, which has an impact on servicewomen from the moment they join until they transition out of service. As an example, Dr. Bélanger talked about how self-conscious of being women many RMC cadets felt, and how such a feeling stays with servicewomen throughout their military career. Therefore, servicewomen face somewhat of a double transition when they exit the service: not only do they shift from a military to a civilian life, but they also transition from a male-dominated to a more gender diverse environment. These need to be taken into account when looking at the transition of female veterans.

Challenge to the Workshop: Heather MacLellan, Veterans Affairs Canada.

In starting her address, **Heather MacLellan** highlighted her extensive practical knowledge on veteran transition, in her quality of a case manager for the Kingston office of VAC who has served in the CAF for eight years and has a military spouse. She also said to find inspiring to have such a workshop taking place in Kingston, due to the city's extensive historical connection to the military. For this reason, she hoped the workshop to be insightful in many ways, and that it will lead to knowledge-sharing and to the identification of challenges and best practices with the end goal to write comprehensive and impactful policy recommendations.

Mrs. MacLellan then moved on to emphasize the gendered aspects of veteran transition. While representing 15 per cent of the veteran population, women represented an even fewer proportion of the cases managed by VAC (in her load of 50 cases, Heather MacLellan has only 12 female clients). While Regular Forces servicemembers transitioning to civilian life rated the adjustment as being moderately easy, not much is known about the experience of many servicewomen, as they tend to go through transition outside VAC's system. This is problematic, as experiences of transition differ greatly depending on one's gender. Mrs. MacLellan presents as a main example the income gap between female and male veterans, with the income of female veteran being on average lower than their male counterparts. It is therefore important to look at veteran transition through a gender lens, so as to understand the differentiated experiences of men and women in transition better and to manage cases with a tailored approach.

To cope with the difficulties of identifying the gendered impact of transition services and policies, case managers at VAC are trained in Gender-Based Analysis + (GBA+), a tool created by the Canadian government to encourage public servants to look at how gender, ethnicity, class, age, and sexual orientation, among others, impact someone's experience policies. GBA+ helps VAC case managers to apply a gender lens in a plethora of areas of transition, including trauma care and mental health therapy. Regarding these specific areas of analysis, Mrs. MacLellan claimed GBA+ helped establish better targeted, trauma influenced mental support and helped transitioning servicemembers gain earlier access to the appropriate mental therapy. Although GBA+ is a newly used tool, VAC makes sure to improve its implementation on a daily basis.

To conclude, Mrs. MacLellan reiterated her belief that the workshop constituted a call for action that would lead to impactful policy recommendations that will be then reviewed by VAC itself.

Panel I: Employment and Career Transition of Women Veterans

This panel gathered a plethora of perspectives on the professional aspect of the transition of women veterans. Chaired by **Dr. Karen Davis**, senior scientist for leadership and culture with the Director General of Military Personnel Research and Analysis (DGMPPRA), the panel provided information on the current environment for career transition, on the resources available for women veterans, and clarified the current challenges in service provision that need to be overcome.

The first panelist was **Kirsten Johnson** of VAC, who started her presentation with an overview of the career transition service that was updated on April 1st, 2018. This system excludes servicemembers transitioning due to illness or injury, as VAC possesses a different program more suited to their needs. The goal of the service is to help veterans in their pursuit of employment, and to assist them in determining and reaching their occupational goals.

The change of system in 2018 no longer requires that veterans pay out of their own pocket and has an extended eligibility. From now on, veterans can reach out to VAC's services at any time after their exit from the military; service members injured during basic training; family, spouses and remarried widow(er)s are now also eligible. Since its implementation, 300 eligible individuals have been participating in the program.

The program is set to assist veterans for two years. The first step is a complete and thorough assessment of the veteran's goals in order to gain an understanding of the characteristics and the needs of the individual reaching to the program. Then, a tailored and holistic plan is created; it generally involves one-on-one counselling, and education and training if need be (according to the occupational goals of the client). After the establishment of a plan, follow-up appointments are scheduled to ensure it is actually helping the client in their transition.

However, many challenges that are yet to be overcome. First, VAC is not yet entirely comfortable with the situation of ill and injured veterans. Second, VAC is gaining awareness that there is a need to provide earlier assistance, i.e. to help servicemembers to prepare for their job search before their exit from service has been completed. An important part of this preparation could be knowledge translation, and VAC could provide assistance to any individual having completed basic training with "labour market transition services." Another challenge for VAC is the fact that it only has offices in Ontario, causing problems of accessibility for the majority of Canadian servicemembers in transition. For now, VAC relies on providing its services via the internet and skype, via online training modules.

The career transition program described was only one of the programs provided by VAC related to employment. Many courses are provided online, on the topics of how to write cover letters/resumes/references for success, how to access job banks, etc. VAC has also set up a national action plan, aims to improve its cooperation and coordination with other government departments, and has established a Veteran Priority Program Secretariat and a Veteran Public Service unit, so as to create a better synergy.

The next panelist was **Marin Beck**, a PhD candidate at Queen's University who works on the Gender Mainstreaming in the Military Project for the Gender Lab at the Centre for International Defence Policy (CIDP). Her presentation emphasized the importance of looking at the statistics in order to see how experiences during service impact servicemembers' transition and life after the military.

Currently, the veteran population is of 660,000 people, and between 4,000 and 5,000 servicemembers leave the CAF each year, most of whom are not in age to retire (the average age of transition being 37) and who are looking for new employment opportunities. However, VAC's programs over-emphasize mental health to the detriment of professional development and end up being under-utilized. Another challenge is the shift in the demographics of the veteran population, with the significant increase of women veterans that served in combat roles. This increase of women needs to be considered in a disaggregated way, as their experience of service differs from that of men. Studies have shown that women are more often exposed to cumulative stressors: they are more likely to develop PTSD and to experience guilt over their work-life balance; and they, on average, receive lower income earnings of 30% compared to their male counterparts following transition.

Taking into account this differentiated data, the Gender Mainstreaming in the Military Project studied programs for veterans and their impact on women. The indicators to assess the impact of 210 programs in 44 different VSPs were as follow: geographical location; the year they were founded; their funding structure; their budget; their administrative structure; whether or not they adopted a gender specific lens and possessed a cultural and minority component; the type of program it provided. The research found that 62 of the studied programs focused on career development; 59 followed the trend, also found in government services, of focusing principally on mental health; and 4 had a gender component, only one of which was about career services.

The takeaways of the study were that policies and programs are lagging behind the international commitment to conduct GBA+ and to mainstream gender; that the services available are not matching the changing demographics of the CAF; and that, while many gaps between service provisions remain, VSPs also face the problem of duplication of services/programs. This study therefore constitutes a call for more need-based and adaptive programs that have mainstreamed gender and that have adopted a holistic approach to transition.

The third panelist was **Rosemary Park**, the founder of the Servicewomen's Salute project and former servicemember who had left the military 24 years prior. As a woman who went through transition, Rosemary Park's experience is an example of what transition should not look like: marked by loneliness, invisibility, and a lack of coordination between resources and services.

Despite transitioning, servicewomen never fully leave the military, and this is where Servicewomen's Salute aims to intervene. It is the project of an association that provides peer support to current and former servicewomen, and whose ultimate goal is to fill in the gaps in services for and the recognition of servicewomen. The principal rationale for the project of such an association is the fact there is a lack of knowledge, acknowledgment of the 132 years of historical military contribution of women in the military, which is translated in a lack of support and services targeting servicewomen specifically. Servicewomen are often seen individually, but rarely as a collective. The Servicewomen's Salute project is currently gathering digital portfolios of servicewomen that will be eventually shared with the public to raise awareness on who these women are and their direction in life, and so that these women regain control over their own narrative. Its work on building external supports will help in raising awareness on the history, present, and future of servicewomen. However, this is not possible without bringing voices together and without conducting research on this section of the military population, research that remains sparse today.

The fourth and last panelist was **Dwayne Cormier** of Hero In Transition (HIT) consulting. The focus of HIT consulting echoes the central theme of this workshop, that of mentoring and how it can help women veterans overcome transition-related difficulties.

Veteran-to-veteran mentorship can be very helpful in coping with issues of career assessment and career transition. The questions of what one wants to do after transition, of whether or not there is demand for such a career, and if there is a need for further education are not as obvious to answer as one may think. Having a mentor who works in the sector in which the mentee wants to work is extremely helpful, as the mentor can help “demilitarize” their mentee’s CV according to the needs of the industry while using a military vocabulary with the mentee so as to ease transition.

Although HIT consulting principally encourages veteran-to-veteran mentorship, it possesses a vast network of Human Resources and of military personnel, as this VSP believes that more than one mentor can provide a more holistic support to the mentee by providing them with multiple perspectives, which will help them make better informed decisions. HIT consulting is also engaged in assisting transitioning veterans in obtaining certifications, in their job search, and in identifying labour shortages. Mr. Cormier invited the audience to visit the company’s website, <http://www.heroesintransition.org>, to know more about what the organisation does to help veterans.

Panel II: Partners and Allies in Veteran Transition

Chaired by **Janet Lauersen**, a nurse case manager in the CAF, this panel focused on showcasing the government and non-government allies and efforts of women veteran at the local, national, and international levels, shedding light on the international perspectives on transition and best practices.

Dr. Dawne Vogt, a Boston-based researcher on veteran health, opened the panel by giving an American perspective on transition. The United States, according to Dr. Vogt, is grappling with the same issues as Canada regarding transition, and the issue of gender is one of them.

The Veteran Metric Initiative Study, funded by both the public and the private sectors, and initiated by the Henry Jackson Foundation, is a five-year longitudinal study following a strategy of multi-sector data collection. It aims at documenting veteran well-being as they transition in four key domains: mental and physical health, vocation, finances, and social relationship; and at identifying the factors associated with better or worse well-being in the first 3 years of transition. The population sample was gathered from people, both from the Regular Forces and from the Reserves belonging to the “post-9/11 cohort,” identified through the Veterans Affairs system. A random sample was invited to participate, but the response rate was low: only 22 per cent of the contacted veterans agreed to join the study. The study was divided into four waves, three of which had been completed at the time of the workshop. In these first three waves, women represented around 18 per cent of the sample. While this proportion appears quite low, it nonetheless enabled the gender stratification of the data.

The findings from wave one to wave three showed that most veterans are doing generally well across domains at the initial stage. However, the overall finances and health of women tend to be lower. The results of the study also showed that the main predictors of well-being following transition are mental health, whether or not the service was the result of an enlistment, the social support veterans enjoyed, and baseline resilience. While mental health issues and enlistment predict a lower well-being after transition, the presence of social support and a higher baseline resilience predict a higher well-being. Regarding gender, the study found more similarities than differences. However, the study relies on self-reporting, which may distort reality, as men tend to perceive themselves as resilient more than women do, and as women tend to under-report when they are facing difficulties.

The second panelist, **Dr. Sanela Dursun**, chair for the NATO research group on sexual violence in military presented NATO Research and Technology Group’s (RTG) research on veteran transition across the Alliance. The research is conducted by RTG-263, the NATO group on transition established in 2015. The goal of RTC-263 is to assess the current programs, policies, and processes available to support service personnel; to develop guidelines for a more effective and efficient transition; and to document the current research on the topic of veteran transition. One of the difficulties in conducting this research is that the term “veteran” differs greatly across the nations, e.g. in many countries, a veteran is exclusively a servicemember that faced combat. As a result, how veterans are perceived by society, how they perceive themselves, how the military family is treated and supported also varies from country to country. RTG-263 found that most veteran transitions were labelled as “fine”, but, once again, not all nations have a veteran transition administration, which leads veterans to rely on charities. On average, across the nations of the Alliance, families and communities are often forgotten in the discussion on veteran transition.

To demonstrate the cross-national and gender differences, Dr. Dursun compared and contrasted findings on transition. In the United States, men are more likely to report combat related PTSD, while women are more likely to report sexual trauma or physical assault. In the United Kingdom, male veterans report their physical conditions more, while women are more likely to be unemployed post-transition, mainly to “look after families.” In Canada, while the overall rates of attrition are declining, medical releases are increasing and are more likely among women. The main reason for medical release is mental health, with men displaying higher rates of PTSD and women displaying higher rates of depression.

However, gender-specific, cross-national trends were identified. Within the first year of service, 20% of women were medically released, compared to 9% of men. While it is known that suicide rates are higher among transitioning veterans, there is also a gender dimension to it: men are 1.4% more likely to commit suicide than the general population, whereas women are 1.82% times more likely to commit suicide than the rest of society. Females are more likely to report being disabled, to care for the family after transition, are less likely to agree that their military skills are transferrable to civilian life, and are more likely to be dissatisfied with their situation post-transition.

The third panelist was **Gordon Wishart**, Senior Analyst at the Office of Veterans Ombudsman. As a gender focal point for the Veterans Ombudsman, his role is to use GBA+, an analytic tool that uses a gender and diversity lens to analyse and inform policies, to help the Office better direct its policies. The goals of GBA+ are to challenge basic assumptions when looking at the impact of programs and policies and to make sure no group is left out of the analysis. GBA+ is critical because the labour force remains segregated. For example, as of 2009, 69% of all women were working in care giving occupations, such as teachers, nurses, social workers, etc. Many initiatives to recruit women and other minorities have failed, due to the continuous questioning of women’s commitment to their careers and a significant lack of mentorship and of role models for women and diverse communities.

However, for the implementation of GBA+ to be successful, management buy-in is necessary, which was the case inside the Ombudsman Office. Learning from other departments, the Ombudsman appointed a champion for GBA+ in the office, the Gender Focal Point, and distributed a statement of intent which gave immediate credibility to the commitment to conducting GBA+. In addition to the establishment of a Gender Focal Point, GBA+ training and the use of the checklist provided by Status of Women were made mandatory for new employees. GBA+ then informed the collection of sex disaggregated data that assessed the role, position, and the well-being of women and identified issues that was disproportionately affecting women within the Department of National Defence (e.g. harassment). GBA+ training was also made mandatory within VAC, but there remain the issues of building capacity, of engaging subject matter experts, of affording complementary training.

The fourth panelist was **Caroline Leprince**, the executive director of Women In International Security (WIIS) Canada. WIIS-Canada is the Canadian branch of WIIS Global, a non-profit organization whose goal is to advance diversity in the field of international peace and security. WIIS Global was founded in 1987 at the University of Maryland, United States. Nowadays, it has chapters in 47 countries and counts 7,000 members including academics, practitioners, and students, all engaged in the advancement of women in International Security. WIIS-Canada was founded in 2007 by Stéfanie von Hlatky, Director of CIDP and Associate Professor of Political Studies at Queen’s University at the time of the workshop, with the purpose of expanding the

mandate of WIIS Global in Canada. To fulfill its goal, WIIS Canada engages in public research, in raising awareness against gender-based violence, organizes mentorship and skill-building development programs, and facilitates networking through its six chapters throughout the country, events such the Annual Workshop and the 16 Days Campaign, and other opportunities communicated through newsletters and job hotlines. WIIS Canada also works to build partnership with a plethora of organizations and to leverage networks, with the overarching goal of promoting gender equity.

Panel III: Perspectives on the Health of Women Veterans

Chaired by the Associate Scientific Director of CIMVHR, **Dr. Stéphanie Bélanger**, this panel discusses the overarching gender dimensions to transition and how they are tied to larger historical and social structure; and the similarities and differences between men and women veterans with regard to health.

Dr. G. L. A. Harris, Professor of Public Administration at Portland University introduced her monograph titled *Women Veterans: Lifting the Veil of Invisibility*, inspired by her own experience of invisibility in the U.S. Air Force. Her monograph highlights the challenges women encounter in the American military, such as discrimination, having their credibility questioned, staggering rates of suicide, of alcohol abuse, of PTSD, and the denial of combat-related benefits. However, gender is not the only marker of difference marginalizing individuals in the U.S. Armed Forces. Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the experience of black women in society, is central. Ironically, intersectionality is such a multidimensional concept that it has been used by white women to describe their own struggles, but it remains all the more crucial when grappling with the experience of non-white women veterans (African-American, Native, Hispanic American, and Asian American). However, contrary to the common assumptions, women of colour have proved themselves to be worthy warriors, for example, Shammuramat of Syria and Queen Nzinga. The belittling of women warrior has for origin the First Crusade and the marginalization of women from the public sphere has continued from then on.

The historical marginalization has led to the belief that women are incompatible with the military. To Dr. Harris, women are actually warriors to the core, and notable examples in History have demonstrated so. She accounts the theory of attrition, which holds that white women in the military are more likely to support other women in non-traditional roles, but because of the high attrition rates among women in the military prevents a critical mass that would encourage non-white women to join the military from forming, for the perpetuity of this assumption.

Paralleling the social and political marginalization of women, women veterans are marginalized from the concerns and challenges of transition, which has a significant impact on their lives after exiting the service. Veteran women are six times more likely to commit suicide than their civilian counterparts. This is, according to Dr. Harris, a wicked problem, as it reveals the marginalizing structures of society as a whole, marginalizing structures that ostracise certain groups even more when looking at intersecting identities, such as ethnicity or class.

The second panelist was **Victoria Tait**, a PhD Candidate in Feminist Security Studies at Carleton University. The core of her research revolves around the gender dimension of MCT. It is known that women veterans experience transition differently than their male counterparts: Canadian female-identifying veterans are more likely to face episodic homelessness, high rates of PTSD, depression and suicide. However, the tendency of using a gender-neutral vocabulary in policies is partly responsible for these issues in transition.

The interaction between gender and the CAF has a long history, and there has been a shift from antipathy to cooptation throughout time. However, this cooptation has mostly translated into attempts of negating femininity and the female gender, which makes the integration of women in the military and their transition to civilian life all the more complex. Both the military and the civilian labour markets are gendered, leading women to leave one gendered occupation to another.

As a result, women veterans' pensions are lower, their responsibility for care are higher, they are over-represented in administrative positions, and they display higher rates of disability.

Nonetheless, Canada has recently paved the way to move forward. The establishment of a feminist Federal government committed to implement the United Nation Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security nationally and internationally, and the application of GBA+ in all policy analyses give hope that the CAF and VAC will overcome their issues of gender blindness.

The third panelist, **Dr. Alexandra Heber**, Chief Psychiatric for VAC, presented the preliminary results of the "Profile of Female and Male Veterans in Canada" report, soon to be released to the public by VAC at the time of the workshop. By using sex disaggregated data, this report attempts to draw the profile of Regular Forces veterans in Canada according to their sex.

The main findings were as follow: men veterans are more likely to release from the military at senior officer levels, are more likely to have served in the Army and to have served longer. On the other hand, women veterans are more likely to release at the Non-Commissioned Member (NCM) level, to have served in the RCAF, and to have served longer. Men are also more likely to voluntarily exit the CAF, while women are more likely to be medically released. Women are also more likely to have a military occupation with transferrable skills to a civilian occupation, yet are less likely to agree that their military skills are transferrable.

The research also looked at the well-being of veterans in a sex disaggregated fashion. Well-being was defined around seven interrelated and mutually influencing domains: purpose, finances, social integration, life skills, housing and physical environment, culture and social environment, and health. The results showed that there was no domain in which men were worse-off than women and demonstrated that women were significantly worse-off in terms of purpose, finances, and health. Women, after release, are more likely to be unemployed, dissatisfied with their situation, and/or disabled. Their overall income is lower than their male counterparts, both before and after release, and are more likely to face a decrease of income following transition, while their male counterparts tend to experience a slight increase income. Women were also more likely to suffer from a mental health condition.

The Veteran Suicide Mortality Study of 2017, which links the Department of National Defence's administrative data with the Canadian mortality data from Statistic Canada between 1976 and 2012, adds a layer to the profile of men and women veteran. While men veterans have a higher rate of 1.4 per cent of committing suicide than the general Canadian population, women veterans are 1.8 per cent more likely to commit suicide that the general Canadian population. For the past four decades, this survey was conducted, suicide rates remained consistent, but Dr. Hebert predicts an increase to occur in the near future.

Although the Profile report and suicide rates point to many challenges, they constitute a great first step towards establishing policies that better respond to the needs of veterans.

Panel 4: Military Families and Support Systems

This panel, chaired by **Vicki Morrison** of the Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, emphasizes the importance of support systems for military personnel and their families. The different presenters look at what can be and what is being done to support servicemembers and their families as they transition to civilian life.

The panel started with a presentation of **Darryl Cathcart's** research on MCT and its impact on the families of transitioning servicemembers. Before delving into his research, Mr. Cathcart gave a few figures concerning the family situation of veterans: upon exiting service, 67 per cent of veterans were married and had children; among whom between 10 and 12 per cent get a divorce following their release. This shows how straining transition can be on families.

Focusing on medically released veterans, Mr. Cathcart's research explored the individual decision-making cycle of servicemembers with advanced careers that unexpectedly and involuntarily had to transition. The rationales behind such a study are that the well-being—or lack thereof—of veterans impacts the government at all levels, that addressing gaps in knowledge enable better policy support, and that, more simply, there is a social covenant to help those in society facing difficulties.

Participants for this study were selected through a purposeful sampling method: they had to have 15 years or more of service, had to be officers or NCM, had to have been medically released in the past 5 years (namely, between 2012 and 2017). The study of the selected veterans' transitions revolved around five themes: decision-making considerations, current policies, the role of the family, and emotional support structures available to them.

Based on face-to-face semi-structured interviews of veterans, the research found that the central concerns for veterans in their decision-making process during MCT were as follows: financial stability (to go back to school, to provide for their family, etc.); a sense of self-worth, which can be very difficult to regain after being medically released from the military; training and education requirements (necessary to achieve self-worth and financial stability); the transferrable skills they could use for a civilian occupation (that can be limited due to the injury leading them to be released from the military in the first place); their health; geography (where they can and cannot go according to their health), and support for civilianization (which, today, does not meet the needs of medically released servicemembers).

From his findings, Mr. Cathcart articulated some recommendations for future policies. Once release is known to be the outcome, the deliberate transition planning process needs to involve families right away. VAC, other government agencies, and VSPs need to invest more in the civilianization process in order to provide more support to veterans on that front. Medical release needs to be condition-based instead of time-related. Although changes are crucial for a more effective and efficient MCT, Cathcart said transitions need to be approached through a “family-first” lens, as veterans are rarely alone when making decisions related to MCT, their seemingly individual decisions having an impact on their families as well.

The second panelist was **Linna Tam-Seto**, PhD candidate at Queen's University, who presented on the importance of mentor in “navigating inter-cultural transitions.” Mrs. Tam-Seto's research adopts an outlook on MCT as a significant cultural transition that impacts veterans in their core identity. Because of the unique socialisation process in the military, transitioning to civilian life requires veterans to adapt to a different culture and way of life. The support of a

culturally competent mentor can be of a great help. Military culture differs greatly from civilian culture in that it values discipline, teamwork, collectivism, and loyalty to a whole, while the civilian world tends to be individualistic and materialistic.

However, there is not a military culture, but military cultures, and transition is very different for every female veteran based on their individual experiences. As a result, MCT is far from being linear, and this is a characteristic of transition that needs to be recognized when supporting the mentorship of female veterans. Military cultural competency is defined as the degree to which individual are sensitive to the unique needs of and to relevant issues of concern within the military and veteran population, and this should be a central requirement when choosing a mentor for a veteran in transition. The idea of “cultural competency” is prominent in health care literature, and it can inform how we approach MCT and mentorship programs as it can help address the inequalities between the help provider and the recipient and can help guide provider to ensure respectful interactions. The concept of cultural competency encompasses five areas of consideration: cultural awareness (i.e., the cognitive appreciation that there is a culture difference and the reflection upon one’s own biases); cultural sensitivity (i.e., the affective aspect of care); cultural knowledge (i.e., the mentor possessing specific information about the population’s own issues, concerns, perspectives, espoused values, attitudes and behaviours); cultural skills (i.e. the ability to provide adequate and culturally appropriate support); and the ecological context (i.e. the support system available). Mentorship, according to Linna Tam-Seto, is not principally about who the mentor is, but also about the cultural competency of the mentor.

The third presenter of this panel was **Dr. Erin Kinsey**, the founder of the Women Warriors’ Healing Garden. She offered a new perspective on MCT, suggesting that there is a need to engage civilians in the transition process to make women veterans feel welcomed back into the community. Grassroot community support can help cope with the identified gaps in veteran mental healthcare.

Female veterans, even after having left the military, continue to be warriors, as they still struggle with their own mental health. However, Dr. Kinsey said they do not have to fight alone, and this is where the Women Warrior’s Healing Garden intervenes. The Garden welcomes all women warriors that identify as “trauma survivors”, whether they are active duty or veterans of the CAF and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Women in active duty feel more comfortable to reach out to a grassroot organization than using government resources. Generally, the women coming to the Garden have tried other programs and did not find them helpful, as they were too short term. Because of the short length of the programs available, women often hit a plateau in their recovery from trauma and/or PTSD. These women also tend to be socially isolated, due to the mental health hardships they are encountering.

Many of the women reaching out to the Garden were victims of military sexual trauma (MST), which one of them described as “incest,” meaning that it causes a loss of trust extremely difficult to overcome. The Garden aims to help these women rebuild trust and to recover from the “machismo mojo” prevalent in the CAF and the RCMP.

In the spring and summer, the Women Warriors’ Healing Garden offers gardening activities and Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT). Gardening enables these women to ground themselves and to reconnect with their physical body and the environment through the sense of touch and by helping plants grow. AAT involves taking care of chicken, which helps these women to clear their mind. Other activities offered by the Garden are as follow: art and sewing therapy (often involving creating something new from their uniform), mentorship to young girls in the juvenile justice

system, a seeding station, canning workshops, and collaboration with other organizations supporting victims of sexual violence. The overarching goal of the Garden is to help women regain confidence, self-worth, and independence.

The Garden has proven itself to help women by reducing their isolation, fostering their integration in civilian life, improving their relationship with children. However, the extent of this help remains a bit obscure, so the next step is to implement scientific efforts in the future, including measurement of stress levels before and after the exposure to the type of therapy offered by the Garden.

The last panelist was **Helene LeScelleur**, PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa, who presented the rationale behind her research on the identity and interpersonal dimensions of transition. While the literature understands the vocational implications of MCT quite well, the issue of identity remains marginalized. Her research will address this gap by focusing on what identity veterans adopt after their life in the military, and on how and why identities differ between veterans.

Although Mrs. LeScelleur acknowledged that PTSD is a central issue in military environments and in MCT, it is far from being the only barrier to a successful transition. The diagnosis of PTSD and the eventual medical release from the Forces often cause a profound sense of loss. However, the literature on PTSD emphasizes on the medical implications of the condition, paying little attention to its social impact. Therefore, there is a need to investigate those factors influencing the processes of readjustment and to understand why it is harder for some people to leave than for others.

Joining the military, according to Helene LeScelleur, constitutes culture shock: the mission first approach, the soldier spirit, and the lack of communication skills are elements of military life that differ greatly from civilian life. And the socialization to the military and the shaping of an individual into a soldier is done in quite a brutal way so as to be as profound as possible. As a result, leaving the military constitutes another brutal cultural shock, a significant loss of identity. The structure disappears, and one's core identification as a soldier needs to adapt itself to civilian life, leading to a loss of purpose and of reference points. One of the goals of transition is therefore to deconstruct the soldier inside. When the release is medical, those issues of identity are duplicated, as they are involuntary and unexpected. The only things veterans see are themselves, their diagnosis, and that the system that created them rejected them.

An important organization helping veterans in their transition is Supporting Wounded Veterans Canada. The organization concerns itself with the loneliness faced by veterans going through MCT, and with helping wounded veterans retrieve a sense of self-worth and a new identity. They help veterans cope with these issues via activities such as rehabilitation through sports, mentorship and employment programs, and volunteering opportunities.

Closing remarks

Meaghan Shoemaker concluded the workshop by synthesizing the discussions that took place throughout the day. The presenters had put an emphasis on the issues of applying an intersectional lens (in the larger sense of the term) to MCT; the need to synchronize policies and to enable greater collaboration between non-governmental organizations and governmental agencies; the importance of identifying and of highlighting veterans' transferrable skills, which will determine their future civilian occupation and their financial stability. Meaghan Shoemaker also highlighted how the panelists shed light on the gender dimensions of transition: women veterans are more likely to be medically released and are impacted by the gender wage gap both in the military and in society, for example. The role for mentorship program was largely argued to be a helpful tool to assist women veterans in their transition by fill in the gaps in government services to veterans. It is also important to listen to women's voices and narratives so as to understand the remaining the challenges to transition, their gender dimensions, and the gaps in policies. Moreover, the panelists have reminded the audience that most veterans have families that are intricately tied to the military life of their military member. As a result, policies and services must integrate families in the journeys of transition.