



The Gender Dimension of Veteran Transition

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Context

If asked to think about veterans, the image that likely comes to mind is that of an older man. Historically, this depiction of veterans makes sense; approximately 85 percent of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are men, with women's representation increasing only incrementally throughout the ranks.¹ As the demographics of the CAF are primed to shift, we also see a corresponding increase in women who are making the transition to civilian life as veterans.

Women are now the fastest growing cohort of veterans in Canada,² and Ontario is home to the largest number of female-identified veterans in the country.³ Kingston has become a prime location for work on veterans' issues given its significance for the CAF (with Canadian Forces Bases in Kingston and Trenton), as well as hosting the most veterans per capita in Canada.⁴ It is for this reason that *The Gender Dimension of Veteran Transition Workshop* was hosted in the Limestone City, and was the result of partnerships and contributions between academia, not-for-profit organizations, government, and the private sector.

"There is a need to move away from the language of 'release' to the language of 'transition.'"

*Colonel Kevin Cameron,
Director Transition Services & Policy*

Why Now?

Canada's 2017 Defence Policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE) identified a shift in focus toward those who serve, and the importance of diversity: "people first, mission always" has become the new mantra. In responding to this ideological shift, gender perspectives must be integrated at all phases of the military career path in order to have a lasting effect. The Chief of the Defence Staff's Directive on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325, which includes the requirement to increase women's representation to 25 percent, is just one example of this shift. As for veterans, SSE calls for:

"[A transformation in] the way the Canadian Armed Forces supports the transition of personnel, whether returning to active duty or transitioning seamlessly to post-military life and the services of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC)...we will create a new Canadian Armed Forces Transition Group that represents a fundamental reinvention of the way transition is managed."⁵

The "Armed Forces Transition Group ... will also make sure that retired members are aware of and/or enrolled in career transition programs offered by the Defence Team and Veterans Affairs Canada as well as third-party service providers, such as vocational rehabilitation, individual career counselling, job search placement, and financial literacy."⁶

The people-centered SSE, commitments toward diversity and inclusion, Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+),⁷ and research on ways to recruit more women into the CAF, are indicators of a shift in the demographics of the CAF. Ultimately, this demographic shift demands a strategy that supports the unique ways in which veterans experience transition. Indeed, from recruitment to retirement, the military experience is now being referred to as *The Journey*.⁸ Because each individual military member's journey is as unique as they are, it is necessary to consider how the needs of veterans may vary based on a GBA+ analysis, from beginning to end.

What is being done?

In Canada, there are indicators that the pendulum is swinging toward improvements in terms of veteran service provision. The integration of gender perspectives is contributing to a shift throughout the Government of Canada. There are now Gender Focal Points within VAC, including within the Ombudsman's Office, and tools that have been developed to support a GBA+ analysis.⁹ Research and collaborative projects considering veteran transition within the Director General Military Personnel Research and Analysis (DGMPRA) and NATO have also emerged in recent years, signifying an international and cross-departmental recognition of improving veteran services.

As of April 1, 2018, a new national service provider has assumed responsibility of program and service delivery for VAC clients. These efforts address identified challenges with previous service provision, which included low awareness of programs and services, low participation, marketing limitations, eligibility issues, and a reliance on self-directed assistance. This new service provider has arguably also modernized veteran services by moving toward virtual service provision, but there are drawbacks to this approach. Particularly for those who need the most help and may feel isolated, a virtual program may unintentionally perpetuate further isolation.

Despite these limitations, these new initiatives will hopefully improve the perceptions of just over half of veterans who report either a difficult (33%) or neutral (15%) experience when transitioning.¹⁰ One of the major areas where change may be most welcomed is with

improved professional transition services, as a positive link between meaningful careers and mental health has

"In the military, you train for everything your whole life. But there is no training for release."

Workshop participant, The Gender Dimension of Veteran Transition Workshop, Kingston, Ontario, 11/12 May 2018.

been established in research.¹¹ Building on this, understanding gender differences in veteran transition presents a high-impact opportunity to enhance professional avenues for former military personnel, which are an undeniably skilled and trained labour force, even if often not recognized as such due to anti-veteran bias.¹² To improve on current practices, we contend that it is necessary to conduct a thorough gender-based analysis and address the divide between federal programs focused on military personnel management,¹³ provincial programs,¹⁴ and the ever-growing civil society organizations that strive to fill gaps observed for veteran care-after-service.

The Transition to Civilian Life: Differences for Men and Women

Despite the positive initiatives and progress described above, research suggests that women veterans experience more cumulative stressors than men when transitioning, but that services and programs rarely take these differences into consideration.

Some of the most notable differences between men and women-identified veterans include women's increased risk of certain forms of PTSD, which influences the ability to obtain gainful employment.¹⁵ There is also evidence that suggests women's greater likelihood to step into caretaker or parent roles,¹⁶ women are more likely to have experienced sexual trauma than women in the general population,¹⁷ and military women tend to be overrepresented in lower ranks when compared to their male peers, which can impact ease of transition and perceptions of employability.¹⁸ In addition, women veterans tend to work less following release,¹⁹ have a harder time finding jobs, and engage in more mental health reporting.

Labour Force Participation: Implications for Women Veterans' Transition

The implications of these differences should inform service provision to improve the integration of veterans into the civilian labour force. Nuance is warranted, however, as the civilian labour force in Canada tends to be quite segregated as well. For example, in 2009, 67 percent of all employed women were working in similar industries; teaching, nursing and related health occupations, clerical or other administrative positions, or sales and service occupations. Over the last twenty years, many sectors have designed targeted campaigns to recruit more women, but many of these initiatives have failed.²⁰

This segregation is mirrored, if not exacerbated, in the veteran context, with VAC research finding that women in the armed forces are more likely to serve in administrative and medical fields. Interestingly, these occupations actually confer what are considered to be more transferable skills when it comes to the civilian job market. Despite these transferrable skills, women are less likely to agree that they possess these skills, and gender-based differences emerge when it comes to self-assessment of competencies.

There are also important differences when it comes to job satisfaction and salary levels. Women veterans experience an average of a 30 percent decline in their income three years after their release, in comparison to the average 10% decline of their male counterparts.²¹ This feeds into discussions surrounding the larger gender wage gap — women make 27 percent less than men in Canada.

These findings are significant because unemployment, income, and job satisfaction are considered key indicators of health in Canada, as previously mentioned.²² As a result, gender-neutral veteran transition programs, meaning programs that do not acknowledge gender-based differences, represent a barrier towards the successful professional and personal reintegration of veterans in Canada. There are clear implications for how we design professional development support services for women veterans in particular.

Conclusion of the Workshop

Researchers and service providers understand that it is important to consider the unique needs of veterans in Canada. Currently, non-governmental organizations have spearheaded most of the initiatives that consider the unique needs of veterans based on gender, but to this end, programs and services are in limited supply, and are often provided only in English. To guide further improvements, we have identified the following recommendations for stakeholders in the veteran service provision space:

Recommendations: Changes in How We “Do” Care-After-Service

1. There is a need to integrate a gender-based analysis into services and programs, and build capacity within Veterans Affairs Canada to enable gender-based training, and its application.

Simple solutions may be developed by understanding that veterans comprise a diverse population; research from civil society finds that women veterans benefit from longer-term programs and initiatives, whereas shorter term programs work best for men.²³ This type of evidence should inform the way programs are implemented for veterans in Canada, particularly with regard to the SSE commitment for a joint suicide prevention program, and improvements in health care service provision.

2. Mirroring efforts in the United States, there is an urgent need for more systematic data collection so that improvements can be guided by evidence-based research.

For example, we would recommend funding research programs that follow the veteran population for three years, with surveys every six months, complemented by qualitative focus groups for more fine-grained analyses of veteran experiences. It is only through systematic data collection that VAC can confidently inform policy development for veteran transition experiences, rather than a snapshot of veterans during exit surveys. VAC should work with its service providers, especially Agilec, to have data collection methods in place.

3. Implementation of a cross-Canada mentorship program for veterans

The two highest predictors of success for a veteran finding meaningful employment are completing an in-

person training program that focuses on resume-building, and direct coaching or mentoring. As a result, the Mentorship Day based on the Women in International Security — Canada framework delivers tangible benefits for women veterans, as it assists them in finding and securing strong support networks.

4. Multi-stakeholder collaboration with Veterans Affairs Canada to build trust with veterans

Although there are gaps and duplications when it comes to veteran service provision, this workshop found that for those experiencing difficulty transitioning, there are still challenges when it comes to veterans trusting government-led service providers. As a result, we propose a combined effort with government providers to ensure proper care, resources, and training, but that the mentorship program be delivered by non-government affiliates, who are closer to the end-users.

5. The creation of “Release DAGs”

Departure Assistance Groups (DAGs) are completed by military personnel every year. These DAGs outline mandatory requirements, re-certifications, and skills development needed while in the military. Women veteran participants in the workshop have proposed the creation of a “Release DAG,” which would provide a personalized roadmap for each veteran and demystify the transition process.

Acknowledgements

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The Gender Lab at Queen’s University is a division of the Centre for International and Defence Policy that provides first-class research and analysis on topics related to gender and defence. The Lab strives to ensure practical and useful applications stemming from workshops, primary research sources, and consultation with local, national, and international stakeholders.

The Gender Dimension of Veteran Transition Workshop would like to acknowledge the generous contributions made by:



Endnotes

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13. Such as the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada.
14. Community and Social Services; Economic Development, Employment and Infrastructure; Women's Directorate
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