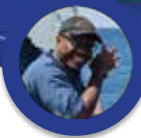




# THE CAF Journey



## Renew Personnel Generation

Reform all aspects of PERSONNEL GENERATION, from attraction and Selection to Recruit Intake Processing and Training.



## Modernize Employment Model

Modernize the employment model and seek to incentive service in innovative ways as we provide a more flexible and adaptable career path.



## Support Military Families

Improve support to military families who face challenges associated with frequent relocation.



## Optimize Total Health & Wellness

Optimize the Health & Wellness of CAF members to ensure a strengthened workforce, best able to meet the varied challenges of both work and life.



## Reinvent Transition Experience

To better support all members of the CAF as they return to work following illness or injury, transition to the care of Veterans Affairs Canada, or transition to post-military life.



## Enduring Affiliation

Collaborate On Veterans initiatives to ensure that all members of the CAF experience a positive sense of enduring affiliation.

Canada

Corporal Parker, Salustro, Canadian Armed Forces

The CAF Journey poster.

## Entrenched Heteronormativity: Gender and Work-Life balance in the Military

by Stéfanie von Hlatky and Bibi Imre-Millei

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### Introduction

The military has acquired a reputation for being a greedy institution because it requires the full dedication of its members.<sup>1</sup> This idea is best exemplified by the principle of unlimited liability but also manifests itself through the daily experiences of military life. Yet, there are other demands on military personnel that come from their personal circumstances, demands that are not always easy to reconcile with a military career. A focus group participant summed it up dryly in the context of this study: 'Well we're in the military, we never had a life. We just work.' In carrying out our research on recruitment and retention in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), we have developed a more granular understanding of the gendered dynamics that underlie work-life considerations in the military. Given the CAF's current focus on reconstitution, driven by culture change and the aftershocks of COVID, initiatives to promote the well-being and professional satisfaction of members should be a priority. A gender-based analysis of military experiences is all the more important given that the CAF has set specific recruitment targets for women.<sup>2</sup>

Western armed forces, including Canada's, have taken steps to improve personnel well-being and work-life balance, often prioritizing mental health initiatives. The CAF is implementing some promising programs, including an 'Adaptive Career Path' approach, and a Defence Team Total Health and Wellness Strategy to better coordinate all health and wellness services, but as Peckham notes,<sup>3</sup> they are not always widely known about or utilized.<sup>4,5</sup> The military has also experienced demographic changes over time and now includes more women and more dual-service couples, who we argue face unique challenges when it comes to balancing the demands of military life with caring responsibilities. As of 2016, 65% of married CAF women in the CAF were in a dual-service couple, compared to 10% of men.<sup>6</sup>

The data we present in this article, which features 52 Canadian active-duty and veteran men and women, reveal work-life balance to be a major concern, even prompting serving members to consider ending their military career because of perceived work-life conflict. Given the significance of work-life balance considerations for recruitment, personnel wellbeing and retention, our research suggests more attention should be paid to helping service-members better manage professional and personal demands on their time. We argue that the military still largely operates from a heteronormative construct which assumes that their mostly male organization can rely on military spouses (mostly wives) to manage the situation at home. Building on insights from Lane,<sup>7,8</sup> Spanner,<sup>9</sup> and Wegner,<sup>10</sup> we bring original data to illustrate work-life balance conflict in the military, with the aim of informing innovative policy solutions to better support CAF members.

This article turns first to the literature on work-life balance within and outside of the military, noting in particular how work-life balance relates to heteronormativity and gendered expectations. After reviewing work life balance in conjunction with CAF policies, this article covers our methods and limitations. We then introduce our own data, from focus groups conducted with Canadian service-members and veterans in Ontario. Finally, we offer some strategies and recommendations to improve the wellbeing of military members, focusing on ways to break down heteronormativity.

### Insights from the Literature

Day-to-day responsibilities, including family obligations, are difficult to balance with military service, that much is not contested in the literature.<sup>6</sup> While work-life challenges are felt acutely by military families, they are also felt more broadly within the armed forces.<sup>11</sup> As one Canadian study notes, all participants (men who were parents in this case) acknowledged that work-life balance is a constant struggle.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, some studies point to work-life balance concerns as a primary reason for service-members releasing from the military.<sup>13</sup> Our research contributes to the literature in showing that perceptions of organisational support are tied to job satisfaction and retention. Therefore, the CAF could improve military personnel policies by paying closer attention to how family life is negatively impacted by frequent relocation and deployment of service-members and better recognizing that evolving gender roles translate into more demanding work-life expectations.

### The Elusive Work-Life Balance

In our study, we identify heteronormativity as a driver of work-life balance strain. Our conceptualization of heteronormativity pulls from Rubin's<sup>14,15</sup> who views patriarchy as the primary organising principle for sex and gender and her "sex/gender system" which posits the mutual construction of heterosexual and cisgender privilege. Applying Rich's<sup>16</sup> idea of "compulsory heterosexuality", we see military heteronormativity as the normalized and entrenched nature of heterosexuality and cisgender identities within the organisational culture, which relies on and perpetuates the ideals of Western nuclear family models. These family models continue to hold sway despite women being encouraged to work, creating the so-called double burden on women's lives as both financial providers and providers of unpaid care work in the home.

For our conceptualization of work-life balance, we use Odle-Dusseau, Britt, and Bobko's definition, who highlight "the extent to which effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family

roles are compatible with an individual's life values at a given point in time" (p. 332). We also draw from Eichler and Albanese's definition of housework to more fully represent how men and women in the CAF balance their responsibilities as a CAF member with other responsibility and activities: "household work consists of the sum of all physical, mental, emotional and spiritual tasks that are performed for one's own or someone else's household and that maintain the daily life of those one has responsibility for" (p. 248). As

Thompson and Walker have argued, we must think of work as broader than paid activities to include unpaid labour in the home. They have found that women spend more time shifting between paid and unpaid family work than men, and that women are more likely to restrict time doing paid work to care for family. Thompson and Walker, as well as Moen and Yu, suggest that the term work-life balance itself is gendered, whereas women are expected to do the balancing and men the working. The authors found that women perceive their husband's jobs as more important than their own, occupy jobs with less autonomy and high demands, and report higher levels of stress.

In the Canadian context, being a military spouse makes it difficult to develop and maintain a career and social life, as a result of frequent moves.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the spouse that is serving and their career becomes the priority in the household.<sup>39</sup> For dual-service couples (such as those in our sample), there is further strain, as one military career might be prioritized over the other. We show career prioritization has become more of a challenge over time within the military, with evolving gender roles. Both spouses expecting to be gainfully employed makes assigning postings more complicated.<sup>17</sup>

Deployment undoubtedly strains work-life balance, making it even harder to reconcile family responsibilities with the professional demands of the military.<sup>19</sup> Interviews conducted by Robertson<sup>12</sup> and Black show parents anxieties about reintegrating into family life after deployment, as supported in the broader literature.<sup>19,18</sup> Family reintegration has its own separate literature from work-life balance, but also deeply affects how caring responsibilities are distributed in the home.

**"career prioritization has become more of a challenge over time within the military, with evolving gender roles."**

The extent to which family-friendly policies and supervisor support can improve work-life balance is made clear in the literature.<sup>19, 20, 18, 21</sup> Dupré and Day<sup>22</sup> found that positive perceptions of organizational support increased job satisfaction in the US, mitigating turnover intentions of service-members.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Sachau et al.<sup>24</sup> found that organizational support had the greatest positive impact on retention of service-members. Bourq and Segal<sup>25</sup> found that US Army policies that are responsive to family needs not only increase the commitment of male soldiers towards the military directly, but show how more positive spousal attitudes matter for job satisfaction.

Immediate supervisors are also a key source of organizational support, with Matsch et al.<sup>26</sup> finding supervisors offered greater support than the organisation as a whole. Building on supervisor support and investing in the training of supervisors is offered as a promising avenue to create a healthier military workplace. In a review of women from 135 organizations Greenberg and Laudry noted that flexibility was a key benefit that women negotiated with their supervisor, and that both supervisor and policy support was necessary for women to reach such arrangements. Increasing job autonomy is a method that can contribute to better work-life balance perception among both men and women.<sup>27, 28</sup> While this may seem incompatible with military culture and practices, the increasing professionalization of the forces, experiences with remote work during the pandemic, and the many support trade roles in the CAF, suggest that the findings of this study could be applicable.

### **Military Personnel Policies in Canada**

In the Canadian context, the difficulty of balancing family commitments with the requirements of a military career was the primary reason for voluntary release.<sup>20</sup> In exit surveys administered to regular force members leaving the CAF between 2013 and 2017, service-members listed job dissatisfaction, geographical stability and family reasons as the top three reasons for leaving the CAF.<sup>23</sup> Men were less likely to say that family issues were a reason for release than women.<sup>38, 29</sup> The 2016 Auditor General's report found that former service-members cited challenges of managing work-life balance as a reason why they left the military.<sup>30</sup> Consistent with the previously cited studies, maintenance of work-life balance is also key to personnel retention in the CAF.<sup>31</sup> A retention survey of the regular force in 2019 suggests that women have better work-life balance than men and are generally more satisfied with their career. The results suggest that while some women find work-life balance difficult, they take a more active role than men at trying to balance their work-life tensions.

In 2017, *Strong Secure, Engaged* described the CAF's strategy to retain service-members as focusing on simplifying the transition from regular to reserve forces as well as allowing for longer-term breaks from service without impacting a service-members' pay-grade or pension eligibility, this has been referred<sup>32</sup> to as "*The Journey*," but few explicit references to this policy exist in the

public domain.<sup>33</sup> Similar to what has been found in non-military workplaces, service-members are seeking better organisational support in the form of improved childcare services, including on-site subsidized childcare, and flexible work arrangements like shorter work weeks, job sharing and flexible hours.<sup>34</sup> While there have been measures to improve job satisfaction and retention in the CAF, this study highlights further avenues to address gendered work-life strain.

It is important that gendered experiences be taken into account when designing military personnel policies. Studies which discuss the inclusion of women in the military, for example, have long noted that work-life balance can impact service-women and service-men in unique ways. Smith and Rosenstein's<sup>35</sup> study found that women may be exposed to more work-life balance conflict, have different work-life challenges than men or at the very least, perceive an important trade-off between staying in the military and starting a family. In general, women<sup>36</sup> in male-dominated professions have to take on certain roles and self-presentations to fit into heteronormative cultures, an additional stressor that comes with the job. While the 2015/2016 Annual Report on Regular Force Attrition noted women had roughly the same attrition rates as men overall, women's attrition rates were higher than that of men after 20 years of service.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that work-life issues might compound over time as women begin to start families and progress in their careers.

**“Building on supervisor support and investing in the training of supervisors is offered as a promising avenue to create a healthier military workplace.”**

Historically, women in operational roles in the CAF had to put their plans to have a family on hold if they wanted to advance their careers while men had more support to pursue both concurrently, as they could more often count on a spouse at home.<sup>38</sup> Waruszynski et al. show that some women in the CAF continue to plan pregnancies to accommodate their unit and leadership to avoid the potentially negative repercussions of having a family,<sup>40</sup> this included not taking the family leave they were entitled to. Ultimately, women are in a double bind because they also face criticism when they put service before self (i.e. leaving children for lengthy training exercise or deployment) rather than upholding traditional gendered roles which would dictate the opposite.<sup>39, 40, 45</sup>

Ultimately, for the CAF to be successful in attracting and retaining women, it needs to consider how their unique needs play into the work-life balance equation. As Waruszynski et al. note, women's top concerns include nursing while training, returning from leave, and childcare.<sup>41</sup> Over time, these concerns cause serving mothers to veer away from their military careers.<sup>46</sup> Unsurprisingly, career progression is also cited by women as one of the concerns bearing on their decision to leave the military.<sup>41</sup> Gendered expectations disadvantage women as their family responsibilities are made to be incompatible with their military career progression, whilst men are better able to reconcile these competing demands because heteronormativity is still ingrained in military organizational culture.<sup>44,45,46</sup> The variation in the conditions for achieving job satisfaction, work-life balance, and healthy family life between men and women is what we examine in our study.

## A Gender-Based Analysis of Military Work-Life Balance

Our study highlights that the military system was built around the traditional family model, failing to adapt as its demographics shifted over time. The military now includes more women with caregiving responsibilities, more dual-service couples as well as members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Building on Spanner's work, who notes that, "the civilian family becomes subservient to the soldier and the military as an institution",<sup>42</sup> we found that the military embodies this heteronormative construct. The result is that military spouses will take on most of the caring and family responsibilities, so that the serving member can focus on professional demands. This model fails servicemembers who do not conform to that expectation. Through focus group data, our research sought a more detailed understanding of how women and men experience work-life balance stress. We propose a typology of factors that affect work-life balance as a theory development exercise to foster future research and steer policy recommendations for the military and veteran organizations.

### Methods

To recruit participants, we sent email ads for focus groups in Ottawa, Kingston, Petawawa and Trenton. Those who filled out our initial demographics survey (results below) and who were available for a focus group were all given a chance to participate. We aimed for a disproportionate stratified sample to create a gender balance in participants as opposed to proportional representation of gender. We determined a 60:40 balance would be acceptable either way (40% men and 60% women or vice versa) and ended up with roughly 42% (n=22) women and 58% (n=30) men out of 52 participants.

Eight focus groups were conducted in total. There was one focus group for men and one for women each in Ottawa, Trenton, and Kingston. Kingston had an additional focus group for men, and there was also a focus group for women in Petawawa. The number of participants in focus groups ranged from three to eleven, with an average of around six participants per group.

All participants were asked the same set of semi-structured questions (see Annex). The open focus group format prompted participants to discuss why they joined the military, what their experiences were like throughout their career, how they and other Canadians felt about the military, diversity initiatives, support offered by the military, and experiences in the transition to civilian life. Three PhD students and two masters' students assisted the principal investigator with the focus groups.

The average age of our sample was 47 years old, with most participants falling between the ages of 35 and 55. 34 participants were married/common law, 9 participants were single, 7 were divorced. Men and women were married, single, and divorced at roughly at the same rates. Most participants stated their highest level of education was college (n=19), and over two thirds of the sample had some form of tertiary education. Out of the remaining

16 participants, all but two finished high school. Of those who provided information on element (50), 19 served in the army, 12 in the Air Force, 2 in the Navy, and 1 in Special Operations Forces, with 16 participants serving in multiple elements. The sample contained 16 junior non-commissioned members, 20 Warrant Officers, Petty Officers or Senior Non-Commissioned Officers, 3 junior officers, and 11 senior officers. Proportionally, 20% of women and 40% of men were junior non-commissioned members; 55% of women and 30% of men were Warrant Officers, Petty Officers or Senior Non-Commissioned Officers; 10% of women and 3% of men were junior officers; and 15% of women and 27% of men were senior officers. 75% of women and 70% of men were non-commissioned members, with the rest being officers.

We designed a coding matrix with categories that included work-life balance considerations as part of a qualitative content analysis (See Annex). First, two undergraduate students transcribed audio-recorded focus groups and interviews. Two PhD students, a masters student, and two undergraduate students participated with the principal investigator in an initial reading of the transcripts to conceptualize coding categories in line with the literature on veteran transition. One of these categories was work-life balance throughout the military career cycle. The masters student and the two undergraduates then carried out manual coding which was verified by the principal investigator. Each transcript was coded by two separate members of the team for intercoder reliability.

**"a heteronormative construct imposes constraints on both men and women in the military, and disproportionately disadvantages women."**

To facilitate the data analysis, the research team identified 18 dominant themes from the literature on gender and work-life balance in the military and compared these with data from our codebooks, adding confirming and disconfirming evidence for each theme. 15 additional themes which were not present in our initial literature review, but were present in broader work-life balance literatures or literatures on gender in the military were identified. We then consolidated our 33 themes into 4 overarching categories to build our typology (competing responsibilities, deployment, support systems, personal relationships) and a fifth crosscutting one: heteronormative standards. Our findings lend further evidentiary support to our argument about why and how a heteronormative construct imposes constraints on both men and women in the military, and disproportionately disadvantages women. Examining the gendered factors that affect work-life balance in the military provides insight into the inner workings of this heteronormative construct, identifying the mechanism through which it imposes a double standard that impairs women's career progression in the CAF.

### Limitations

We acknowledge that our sample is limited in size and scope, since we only conducted the focus groups and interviews in Ontario, as per our grant specifications. However, based on our argument, we would not expect to have different findings in other provinces and territories, except for Québec, which has distinct provincial childcare benefits. Moreover, since many of our participants had moved to multiple provinces throughout their careers, the experiences that were shared with us are not limited to Ontario.

While our participants were often quite open, even blunt when sharing stories about their personal trajectories, we acknowledge power dynamics could have affected the focus groups discussions, when both lower-ranking and higher-ranking members shared the space. On one occasion, we did notice that when a higher-ranking member (who was in the process of transition) left early, the focus group participants opened up further.

Finally, while we focus on a single country (Canada), we would expect the work-life balance strains we identified to be experienced in other countries, like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Our findings offer novel insights into how gender affects work-life balance in the military, and could open avenues for future research in Canada and beyond.

### **A Typology for Military Work-Life Balance**

This section introduces our typology, based on the five aforementioned themes: the demands of a military career, the deployment double standard, military support systems, personal relationships, and heteronormative standards. In this section, we also include data in the form of quotes from our focus group discussions, which are representative of the views shared.

#### ***Competing Responsibilities***

The first theme relates to a military culture which favours professional demands over family responsibilities. We found that, while men are impacted by this, women appear to be more systematically disadvantaged. CAF members are expected to sacrifice aspects of their personal lives to fulfill the demands of the military, but women participants noted experiencing the double standard of being expected to prioritize their family responsibilities despite the demands of military life.

Though more prevalent in men, our participants generally felt they could have their career first and focus on family later. Men and women in our focus groups and interviews talked about the need to make up for lost time with families and expressed regret for neglecting their families because of the demands of their military career. This echoed a 2019 regular force retention survey, which suggests that members of the CAF are often unsatisfied with how postings affect their partners and children.<sup>39</sup> One of our participants expressed this sentiment very explicitly after discussing how her previous children had experienced her and her husband's multiple deployments and postings:

We call our youngest our makeup child, in the sense that you know, she's really the one that we concentrate on cause we're trying to give her that good foundation, where with our other children we're like, three years here, four years here, you know like always moving, always unstable in a way.

Another participant expressed how an injury made him re-evaluate his priorities:

I think if I didn't get shot, I would still be doing the job and putting shit on my family, because I never learned how to stop, I didn't know where that break was, now, I have no choice.

In the literature, this trade-off between family and a military career is most salient in accounts about military deployment, but we found this to be a concern at every career stage. The idea that work-life anxiety is a constant rather than transient issue is consistent with Pickering's work, which finds that the military lifestyle beyond just deployment disrupts and interferes with family responsibilities.<sup>43</sup> Many of our participants discussed work-life strain being a regular of their day-to-day reality. One woman, for example, opened up about her struggles as a single parent:

I just found that I couldn't give enough. [...] I used to bring my daughter with me at 3 o'clock in the morning 'cause I was doing supply tech.

Both men and women expressed that constantly privileging their career over their family contributed to their decision to leave the military, which is consistent with

studies on work-life conflict and retention conducted in other countries.<sup>11, 23,44,45</sup> However, being able to say no to disruptive deployments or assignments, or even leaving the military, depended on the person's rank and their economic circumstances. Our participants who were higher ranking often felt they had room to negotiate, or had amassed enough income and experience that they could leave the military. Considerations based on rank were repeated multiple times, especially throughout the men's focus groups:

I missed my granddaughter's second birthday party, and I was told I would be home for it – and they sent me off in the opposite direction to where I was supposed to be going, and I was fortunate enough I had the time and the advantage in that time to say, 'I'm done, family is too important to me.'

Our findings indicate that if the CAF further enhanced family support services, it could possibly improve retention by creating an environment where service-members can progress without sacrificing their family lives.

#### ***Deployment***

The second theme reveals the gendered double standard in deployment, whereby men are praised for deployments, but women are sometimes criticized by their superiors and peers for abandoning their caregiving responsibilities. Men are encour-

**“Both men and women expressed that constantly privileging their career over their family contributed to their decision to leave the military”**

aged to deploy and praised when they do, even when they have a family at home. Having a family at home may even translate into additional praise, because men are seen to be making a sacrifice. Women participants recounted expectations that they should put their families first and often felt judged by their colleagues when taking assignments or deployments which took them away from their families:

It's normal for a man to deploy and not for women. So, the guy won't have to ask his wife, 'is it ok if I deploy?' No, 'I'm gonna deploy and you're gonna take care of the kids.' The other way around, it's not necessarily the same thing.

And another participant, commenting on the judgmental nature of her workplace, noted:

I was a single parent too. I got deployed, uh, three times, but twice when I had my son and I had to leave him behind. And the people were so judgmental about the fact that I was leaving my son behind when I got deployed.

We also found that some men enjoy deployment precisely because it freed them of their family responsibilities. Men in one focus group agreed that deployment was “relaxing” even if their families might suffer, because “there are no distractions.” This was not the same for women who seemed more anxious about leaving their family behind. As one participant noted, “[women are] leaving two jobs behind.”

Men in our focus groups would not consult their wives on decisions around deployment, yet, the military requires the support of the whole family during deployment.<sup>11, 43</sup> Our focus groups revealed that, for dual-service couples, wives felt an incredible strain when attempting to compensate for their husband’s absence. There were also notable gender-based differences when it came to preparing for deployment. We found that women in particular were stressed about making preparations for their family prior to their departure, compared to men. Echoing findings from other studies, it seemed that both men and women in our study believed that you could not have a successful military career and family life, a dynamics which is exacerbated by deployments.<sup>46</sup>

**Support Systems**

The third theme deals with the support systems of service-members, where men seem to draw support from their wives, and from their direct supervisors. Women, by contrast, needed additional sources of support, often drawing on a community of other women in the military, as is supported by other studies.<sup>47</sup> Some of our participants remarked on the lack of help for women, when men with similar struggles were supported more readily. In many focus groups, both men and women focused on promises of support that were not met by the military. Many remarked that “they preach family first” but that this was not really the case in practice.

The results from our study suggest that perceptions of support were affected by the relationship with direct supervisors, but that

this varied based on the supervisor’s personality, gender, trade, and marital/familial status. Our participants also expressed the importance of having superiors who promote a healthy work-life balance but remarked that this was not consistently the case. One man, commenting on the behaviour of a high-ranking CAF member, remarked that “He would burn his people into the ground, and he lived that way too. He just retired by himself, his family’s gone, he’s divorced.” Many participants expressed similar sentiments about leaders, but some also discussed how they internalized and praised toxic work-life habits themselves, not realizing the negative effects until much later.

Women often felt that supervisors and colleagues who were men did not understand their needs and had trouble supporting them. However, support seemed to be better in some trades than others. For example, women mentioned that the infantry and combat arms were not supportive of family and caring responsibilities. Support trades on the other hand, where the majority of women are concentrated, tended to be more sensitive to work-life balance concerns. Men noted how in combat units, desiring a healthy work-life balance was often seen as weakness.

**“it seemed that both men and women believed that you could not have a successful military career and family life, a dynamics that is exacerbated by deployments.”**

**Personal Relationships**

The fourth theme highlights how the demands of the military can damage romantic and familial relationships. Some participants also noted strained friendships from moves, constant work, and a lack of understanding on the part of civilian friends. Spousal support was identified as an important factor in both men and women’s conception of their work-life balance, but men and women experienced different struggles.

Men discussed how their wives did not understand their commitment to the military. A gender-based double standard is at work as men are expected to be committed to their career, while women are expected to be committed at home despite their career. Women claimed that they were made to feel selfish for being committed the military while having a family. For the men who participated in our study, wives who “understood” their need to work were deemed to be strong and worthy. Men rarely admitted that their relationships were destroyed by work-life strain and instead discussed how their wives and girlfriends couldn’t “take” the sacrifices of military life. This does not mean that men were not affected by work-life strain, rather, that they were taught work-life strain is an expected aspect of the job that they and their family must endure.

**Heteronormative Standards**

The final theme relates to the military’s heteronormative standards, incorporating aspects of the previous four themes in the typology. As one of our participants noted, the military system is “made by a man who assumes there is a wife behind,” articulating very clearly why work-life balance in the military affects women and men in unique, gendered ways.

Women in our study felt men were treated more favorably, and also felt that men, including supervisors, did not understand their needs and struggles. For example, a participant discussed

how when a member of her unit was going through a divorce, he received an outpouring of support from her unit, when she and the other single mothers had never received any. Our women participants often felt judged on the basis of traditional gender roles, and felt they had to conform to masculine norms or disprove misconceptions about women, as supported by the broader literature on field dominated by men.<sup>36</sup> While men were labeled as ‘brave’ and devoted for performing household and caring duties, women were just expected to perform these roles naturally on top of military tasks.

The experiences mentioned above have real impacts on how women receive support, navigate relationship and responsibilities, and deal with postings and deployments, all of which impact work-life balance. Women participants claimed leadership (mostly men) did not understand women’s needs when it came to work-life balance and therefore could not adequately support them. One woman discussed how when she asked her supervisor to go to her child’s kindergarten opening, citing the fact that they lived in the same neighborhood so he must be attending too, he answered “no, my wife handles all of that,” and would not let her go.

However, women in our study also held some heteronormative attitudes themselves. Some women said that men were incapable of fulfilling certain familial responsibilities and felt the need to manage the home even when they were deployed. In many of these conversations, the implication was that men were dismissive or completely incompetent:

[M]y husband has no concept of what it means to prepare the children for daycare and lunches and schoolwork and everything. No concept! And yet, we both deploy, we both do the same job every day and in my case, I’m the senior rank.

Some women were assumed to be a civilian spouse in both military and civilian situations and felt that their role as service-members was often downplayed. Based on the literature, civilian spouses mention that it is difficult to work due to their caring responsibilities and the work demands of their CAF partner.<sup>18</sup> The military perpetuates the expectation that spouses will stay home to support the military member, a dynamic which is amplified for dual-service couples and service-members who are single parents.<sup>46</sup> Women in our study, especially those who were part of dual service couples, felt that they were expected to perform the double duty of civilian spouse and service-member, while receiving little support and understanding.

To summarize our analysis of the focus group data, we found that women were just as enthusiastic about the military as men, just as excited for deployment, and just as willing to sacrifice time for the military. The women we interviewed planned to serve for similar lengths of time as the men we interviewed, but women had additional family expectations and pressures which men did not

have to the same extent, creating an environment where women felt overworked. Women often brought up their family and did so much more readily and without prompting, compared to the men in our focus groups. When men did discuss family, they were more likely to discuss their partners over their children, and whether those partners supported or did not support them. The struggle to balance work and life seemed to always be on the minds of the women participants, whereas the men felt they could set aside their life almost completely for their work.

It is important to note that heteronormative standards also hurt men in the military. As the data from our study shows, men are expected to put service before family, and socialized within military culture to view extreme versions of this as normal, negatively affecting their relationships with family, and creating a culture of overwork which can impact mental health.

**“The women we interviewed planned to serve for similar lengths of time as the men we interviewed, but women had additional family expectations and pressures which men did not have to the same extent, creating an environment where women felt overworked.”**

### Conclusion and Recommendations

While studies and military personnel policies have recognized that work-life balance affects military members and their families, the gendered nature of military experiences is often overlooked, a gap this article addresses. Our findings illustrate our argument that heteronormative standards affect women and men in the military in distinct ways and suggest that the CAF should pay closer attention to gendered work-life strains in designing retention strategies. It is particularly important for the CAF to push against the assumption that men in the CAF have a spouse at home who will take care of family life or that serving

women will bear most of the caregiving burdens of their family. Furthermore service-members should be encouraged to take time for their families, and supervisors should check in to make sure this family time is actually taken. Encouraging men to take on caring roles could begin to mitigate some of the prevailing biases on gender roles. Ultimately, women should be supported in the caregiving duties they already participate in, while men should be encouraged to be actively involved in balancing their work and their life.

Our research findings can hopefully open the door to more intersectional analyses of work-life strains in the military. If cis-gender, heterosexual white women are negatively impacted by the CAF’s definitions of and ideas about family structures, the experiences of racialized minority and 2SLGBTQIA+ CAF members should be further examined. The findings from our focus groups point to a work-life balance system set up with a heteronormative and Western family model in mind, which assumes men in the military will have a civilian wife at home. This model is outdated and has caused harm to military personnel and their families.



## ANNEX 1: FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Entering Military & Military Experience Questions

- 1) To get the conversation started, can everyone introduce themselves and tell us why you joined the military? Were you considering other jobs?
- 2) What was your experience like in the military?  
*NOTE: some people go into intense detail and give their biography and employment history with CAF. This can take a lot of time and is also information we have from the preliminary survey when making selections. Try to get at their experiences rather than employment history.*
- 3) Is work life balance a consideration when you're in the military? What about once you've left? Do you think this balance is easier or more difficult to achieve in the military?
- 4) Do you think men and women have different experiences in the military? How?
- 5) If you deployed, what was your decision making process for this?

### Leaving the Military Questions

- 1) Now I'd like to talk about your experiences transitioning out of the military: What was your release like?
- 2) What were/are your expectations when you transitioned to civilian life?
- 3) Do you/did you have a plan for entering the work force? What was it?
- 4) What resources or services might you/did you need to support you during this transition?
- 5) Were resources for the transition from military-to-civilian life easy to access?
- 6) Did you attend a SCAN seminar prior to your departure? Executive or general? Experience?
- 7) What were the most challenging aspects of returning to civilian life? What helped you when returning to civilian life?
- 8) What were your responsibilities upon returning to civilian life? (parents, family, children, animals).
- 9) What preparation did the military/government provide you leading up to your civilian transition?
- 10) Were you aware of transition services (government or private) before/during your transition?
- 11) What are your thoughts on DWDs?

### Entering Labour Force Questions

- 1) How do the skills that you gained in the military translate into civilian sectors?
- 2) What challenges do/did you anticipate or have you experienced on the job market?
- 3) Do your/did your experience experiences in the military have a positive or negative effect on your transition?
- 4) How do you think the general population perceives veterans and your abilities/skills?
- 5) Did you feel competitive entering the job market? (i.e. qualified, confident?)
- 6) What are some professional strengths and skills you may have gained as military personnel and how do they translate into civilian sectors?
- 7) What would have helped you during this transition from military to civilian lifestyle, be it personal or professional? (Usually comes out naturally)

Is there anything else that is important to you that you would like to share?



**ANNEX 2: Codebook**

	JOINING	DEPLOYMENT	MIL EXPERIENCE	LEAVING/ TRANSITION	VETERAN EXPERIENCE
Financial Considerations					
Support System (Family, Friends)					
Health (Mental/Physical)					
Military Identity and Culture					
Professional Fulfillment/ Purpose					
Dignity/Pride/ Recognition					
Work-life Balance/ Personal Sacrifice					
Denial/Making Excuses/ Rationalizing					
Resources/Services/ Institutions/Bureaucracy					
Routine/Structure/ Autonomy					
Military Community/ Camaraderie					
Work Conditions (Perks or Grievances)					
Civil/Military Connection or Disconnect					
Career Advancement/ Management/Leadership					
Sexual Violence					
Sexism + Gender-Based Resentment					

For Each Entry Specify: **M/F** (male or female) AND **+/-/N** (positive/negative/neutral)

If text is too vague/general, or if unrelated, don't include in codebook: "I can describe it, um, for me, it was great. I would do the same thing over again"

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