Members of the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, participate in fire prevention operations in Grande Prairie, Alberta in support of Operation LENTUS 23-01 on May 11, 2023.

Women's Deployment Experiences: Safety, Barriers, and CAF Culture Change

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Most Canadians consider peacekeeping to be an important part of the country's identity.[1] With the election of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2015, the Liberal majority government promised to re-engage Canada in peacekeeping—a promise that also entailed increasing the involvement

of women on peacekeeping operations (PKOs).[2] **The Elsie Initiative, a project that aims to help overcome barriers to increasing women's meaningful participation in peacekeeping operations, includes a $15 million global fund to accelerate the deployment of women, as well as additional funding dedicated to the UN Department of Peace Operations to improve their ability to support and benefit from women's presence in higher numbers on peacekeeping missions. The Elsie Initiative also supported the creation of the Measuring Opportunities for Women in Peace Operations (MOWIP) methodology, which identifies universal and context-specific barriers to women's full integration in military or police organizations and their access to UN PKO deployment opportunities.[3] The CAF applied this methodology and released its MOWIP assessment in August 2022.**

Like other intervention spaces, such as training and education, special attention should be paid to deployment contexts as a site of military culture change. In this perspectives article, I apply my dissertation research about the experiences of servicewomen during deployment on peacekeeping operations (PKOs), as it relates to safety, to the matter of military culture change. I begin with a brief overview of literature on Canadian peacekeeping and gender, then discuss my research findings to better understand women's barriers on deployment, specifically regarding safety. In order to foster culture change in the CAF, women's unique gendered barriers on deployment must be addressed in a meaningful way, moving away from operational effectiveness arguments to justify women's increased representation.

Literature Review

Conversations about the increased representation of women in the international arena were formally institutionalized with the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, the basis of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. UNSCR 1325 includes four pillars: participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery. It calls for the increased participation of women in peace processes, the protection of women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence, the prevention of violence against women, and the need to address international crises through a lens

of gender equality. UN member states have shown their commitment to UNSCR 1325 through the implementation of National Action Plans (NAPs) in which governments identify their priorities and responsibilities and commit to operationalizing and implementing WPS. Canada's current NAP on WPS, along with the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), the Elsie Initiative, and Canada's defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, form the basis of Canada's feminist foreign policy.

Canada's NAP stresses that women have "vital roles in establishing and maintaining peace" and must be involved in conflict prevention and peacemaking in order to achieve global peace and security; to this end, increasing women's participation in peacekeeping is a priority for Canada.[4] Similar logic is applied by the CAF in its goal to increase the representation of women, the Elsie Initiative, and the United Nations Gender Parity Strategy. The focus remains on metrics and instrumentalism—increasing the number of women so that they can improve operational goals, rather than for the sake of rights-based justifications based on gender equality. When it comes to women's representation in peacekeeping, Kathleen Jennings argues that "it is not what women *do*, but who they *are* that makes the difference."[5] The major justifications for increasing the number of women in peacekeeping have remained both instrumental and essentialist: deploying more women is assumed to lead to kinder, gentler, less-abusive and more-efficient peacekeeping missions.[6] This thinking, or "smart peacekeeping," is not primarily about equality; it is about expecting women to improve security outcomes on PKOs without changing underlying issues within peacekeeping and in the national militaries that contribute personnel.[7] Similar instrumentalist logic is espoused when promoting CAF culture change—that a more inclusive culture will make the CAF more effective.

Since the height of Canada's participation in peacekeeping in the 1960s to the 1990s, when Canada was one of the world's largest contributors of "blue helmets," its reputation as a peacekeeping nation has been diminished by scandals and the failure of UN PKOs in countries such as Somalia and Rwanda.[8] Scholars have emphasized how Canada's peacekeeping past is fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies, with nostalgic yearning for a coherent past rooted in Canada's identity as a "good" middle power with altruistic geo-political interests and even as a "helpful hero" in Afghanistan.[9]

Several scholars have emphasized that peacekeeping may increase the insecurity of local populations rather than

alleviate it[10] and research documents sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of local populations perpetrated by (male) peacekeepers.[11] However, less is known about the experiences of women peacekeepers. According to the UN Department of Peace Operations, in 2020, women constituted 4.8% of military contingents on peacekeeping operations and 10.9% of formed police units.[12]

A central contradiction in peacekeeping is that the vast majority of peacekeepers are soldiers, "people skilled in the arts of violence and the protection of nation and territory," where the blue beret is supposed to be "benign, altruistic, neutral and capable of conflict resolution in any cultural setting, a warrior-prince-of-peace."[13] Masculinized environments dominate national militaries, and in turn, UN peacekeeping, where women continue to be excluded and marginalized in numerous ways.[14] Even with increased attention to SEA committed by peacekeepers (where people of all genders are victims, but women are over-represented), less is known about the risks and challenges that women peacekeepers experience while deployed. There are unavoidable challenges on deployment experienced by everyone, including managing operational tasks and expectations and the difficulty of being separated from loved ones. However, women face uniquely gendered challenges with regards to their safety. When discussing safety during deployment, I focus on equity and women's physical and psychological safety while on base. Gretchen Baldwin and Sarah Taylor (2020) argue that some women are "more worried for their safety within military camps and bases than on the battlefield or on patrol."[15] Likewise, Arbour argues that some CAF members are "more at risk of harm, on a day to day basis, from their comrades than from the enemy."[16] Arbour's statement is an important contribution to understandings of CAF culture; however, while her mandate was to examine sexual misconduct and leadership, there was a missed opportunity to pay attention to safety and sexual misconduct when deployed abroad, as this is an important aspect of CAF culture.

Methodology

In 2020, I conducted interviews with 40 Canadian women who were current or former members of the CAF to understand their experiences, opportunities, and challenges while deployed on United Nations PKOs and while serving in the CAF more broadly.[17] I was committed to a feminist methodological perspective[18] and I relied on thematic analysis to organize the data that I collected.[19] A feminist methodological perspective takes women's everyday experiences seriously and looks at larger structures and strategic concepts as gendered.

A key component of this research was ensuring participants' confidentiality and anonymity. It is for this reason that my discussion is devoid of any identity markers that may put participants at risk, including details on where they deployed, when, and in what capacities. As women's participation in peacekeeping has at times been extremely marginal, I am committed to protecting participants, especially as many shared intimate experiences of discomfort, discrimination, and sexual misconduct that they were worried may be attributed to them or to those who caused them harm.

Of the 40 women I interviewed, 26 were current CAF members and 14 were former CAF members. They ranged in service from a couple of years to a few decades. Participants represented a wide variety of support occupations (medical, administrative, and supply technicians) and several worked in operational occupations (infantry, artillery, and armoured). Participants also represented a range of ranks, from junior non-commissioned members to senior officers. Collectively, the women I interviewed deployed to 20 different missions, of which 11 were considered peace support operations and included deployments to Bosnia, Haiti, South Sudan, the DRC, and Mali, among other missions. Nearly half of my research participants also deployed to Afghanistan. Eighteen explicitly identified having experienced some sort of sexual misconduct during their time in the CAF and 22 did not.[20] Of the women who did not experience sexual misconduct firsthand, all knew someone who did.

Findings

A quarter of my participants agreed that women's presence improved mission effectiveness in key ways, such as: gaining trust and access to local populations, prioritizing women's issues, and acting as role models. However, even if women, and men alike, wanted to be more compassionate, caring, and approachable to local populations, they are constrained by UN mandates, volatile environments, socioeconomic differences, and hyper-masculine military cultures. Likewise, very few women are deployed in capacities that would require using these skills, for example, as Military Liaison Officers or UN Military Observers who typically have regular contact with local communities. As such, most of my participants thought essentialist and instrumentalist justifications for their presence were ridiculous, unfounded, and a couple even found them insulting. Participants challenged essentialized notions of womanhood and smart peacekeeping logics. One participant explained how her own mother could not tell who she was with all of her equipment on; therefore, her gender would likely be

Trooper Rebecca McDowell of the Queen's York Rangers dangles above the water pit during the rope obstacle at Canadian Forces Base Borden, during Rogers Challenge 2016, the Regiment's annual dismounted patrolling skills competition on October 15, 2016.

Image by: Pte Jesse Kalabic, 32 CBG Public Affairs

indecipherable to local populations as well. Another participant asserted that most women she knew did not want to be the face of how so-called progressive Canada is in terms of gender integration. She argued, "not a lot of women want to become the poster girl for women in the army, they didn't sign up for that, they signed up to do their jobs." Her comment suggests that the burden to improve gender integration often falls on the shoulders of women, which is neither fair nor desirable.

Women's ability to participate on PKOs can be inhibited if they do not feel safe while deployed. Based on my research findings, two participants noticed a clear improvement in overall safety over time based on their experiences on deployments prior to the early 2000s in comparison to those in the last decade. Earlier deployments were fraught with challenges as several participants found it difficult to negotiate between, what one participant explained as, "walking in the boys club without being groped and still being a value to the team." Another participant who deployed to Bosnia in the late 1990s explained that women were briefed about rape and rape kits. It bothered her that "men could do things women couldn't" as men did not have to participate in precautionary briefs on sexual assault as, in her opinion, the threat of rape on base did not exist for them. Only briefing women about rape does not resolve rape culture if men are not proactively part of the conversations at the same time. Another participant explained that the opportunity for sexual assault in the Bosnian camp was high and she found it exhausting to always think of her own safety in this regard. Participants from more recent deployments, such as the mission in Mali, had fewer gendered safety concerns overall. However, due to the risk to the UN camp in an active conflict zone, the base had to be dark so as not to be targeted. As a result, one participant noticed that it seemed like an area where the chance of rape was high. So while women's safety may have improved over time, gendered risk is present in very similar ways as it was two or three decades ago.

Further, in order to cope with the real and perceived unsafe environments that some participants were subjected to while deployed, they used a variety of strategies to keep safe that required constant vigilance. Some strategies that they employed included partnering up, having a colleague act like a 'big brother' when they needed to exit a situation or be walked back to their rooms, and even avoiding leisure activities altogether, especially when they involved alcohol (as the perception was that alcohol increased women's insecurity as some men became more aggressive or demeaning after drinking). One participant explained the lengths she went through to protect herself that she thought her male colleagues did not need to be conscious of, and probably never even considered. Her risk mitigation strategies included paying close attention to details outside of her room, ensuring door numbers and key numbers weren't labeled incorrectly or didn't match, making sure her room number was not audibly mentioned in front of other people, letting colleagues know that if she screams to come help her immediately, and carrying a knife. She also recalled occasions that she had to sleep with her lights on and fully clothed "just in case." The risk mitigation strategies that my participants explained are not uncommon as similar strategies have been documented by servicewomen in the US military.[21] Safety risks were perceived to come from personnel from other nations and from Canadian colleagues. This is unsurprising given that sexual misconduct continues to persist in the CAF. Fostering culture change cannot be accomplished without eliminating sexual misconduct in the CAF's ranks.[22]

Conclusion

Deployment experiences shape and are shaped by overall CAF culture. Based on my research, this includes instances of women feeling that essentialist and instrumentalist justifications for women's increased participation are mostly unfounded. Even if women wanted to contribute to mission effectiveness in unique ways, they are inhibited from doing so while feeling unsafe when deployed. Sexual misconduct and other harms continue to persist in the CAF at home and abroad, from both Canadian colleagues and international ones. To foster culture change, my research demonstrates the importance of understanding women's everyday military experiences,

particularly on deployment. Future research should consider identity factors beyond sex and gender, including but not limited to: race, ethnicity, age, and mental or physical ability. Women's deployment barriers, and harmful CAF culture, cannot be changed without recognizing how all identity markers shape women's experiences and how these are rooted in systemic discrimination. It is critical to consider the multiple and overlapping ways that discrimination and oppression function to marginalize some people more than others and in varying, nuanced, and complex ways. Similarly, culture change in the CAF must go beyond an instrumental approach to operational effectiveness, starting with naming problems and addressing systemic and institutional barriers meaningfully, through an intersectional perspective, with the inclusion of voices from those who have been harmed or impacted.

Notes

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