



Women in the Royal Canadian Navy: Breaking Barriers and Paving the Way

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Over the years, women have successfully moved into new occupations in new fields, and this includes the military. Since releasing its new defence policy in 2017, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) have identified the recruitment of women as a priority. The policy states: “we are committed to attracting, recruiting and retaining more women in the CAF across all ranks and promoting women into senior leadership positions. The CAF is committed to gender equality and providing a work environment where women are welcomed, supported and respected.”¹ When the policy was released, women represented 15% of CAF members (compared to the 11% average of NATO allies). The goal established in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* is to increase this number to 25% over a period of 10 years.² The 25% female representation target is applied to all branches of the CAF, including the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). The Chief of Defence Staff, General Jonathan Vance, is determined to reach this target and have women represent a quarter of the military personnel by 2026.³

According to official RCN statistics, there are 7,510 positions within the navy, 6,681 of which are filled with trained personnel. There are 760 women currently serving in the ranks of the RCN, representing 11.3% of the navy’s regular force, a number lower than the average of women serving in the CAF in general.⁴ The RCN states that it is determined to meet the target set by *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, and continues to focus on achieving the goal.

Despite the enthusiasm with which the military leadership has greeted the proposal, the objective of increasing this number by 1% every year has so far fallen short of its target. After two years, the number of women in the CAF has only increased by 0.7%, for a total of 15.7%. The CAF in general and the RCN still have difficulty recruiting and retaining women. Therefore, it is worth discussing the various challenges that women face in this male-dominated field of work. This article will briefly discuss the history of women in the RCN and the evolution of their role over the years, and will also provide an overview of some of the challenges in terms of recruitment and retention.

The History and Evolution of Women Serving in the Royal Canadian Navy

Women have served in the RCN since 1914. Given the extraordinary circumstances of fighting such a large conflict, particularly in the face of personnel shortages, exceptions were made to the prevailing social norms. During the First World War, the first women to serve in the Royal Canadian Navy – although unofficially – took on the roles of nurses.⁵ It was not, however, until the Second World War and the Battle of the Atlantic that women assumed official roles within the ranks of the RCN. In January 1942, with the help of the British Admiralty, the RCN created the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS). The female members who served in the

WRCNS, also known as the Wrens, were considered to be an integral part of the RCN and therefore fell under the same regulations as the rest of the navy, meaning that female officers' rank and authority conformed to those of the RCN.⁶

Initially, Wrens worked in what were referred to as 'feminine trades' but as their integration into the navy progressed, more diverse and technical trades became available, such as visual signallers, coders and wireless telegraphists, among others. These roles meant that the Wrens participated in actions such as locating enemy U-boats and assisting Allied vessels navigating in the Atlantic region, rendering their operations top secret as well as essential to the Allied war effort.⁷ By the end of the war, nearly 7,000 women had served as Wrens in 39 different trades. In August 1946, the WRCNS was disbanded, along with the Canadian Women's Army Corps and the Women's Division of the Royal Air Force, and it was not until the early 1950s that women could enroll in the CAF again.⁸

Women's employment within the forces, however, remained restricted to traditional roles such as medicine, communication, logistics and administration. In the 1970s these discriminatory policies began to be contested following the recommendations issued in 1971 of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. This resulted in expanding employment opportunities for women into what were considered non-traditional areas.⁹ However, following this report, there was a period of study and examination, and it was not until the late 1980s that women were fully integrated into all occupations within the RCN, with the exception of serving on submarines.

In 1979, the CAF introduced a series of tests to examine how mixed gender groups affected operational capabilities. The SWintEr tests were conducted from 1979 to 1984 and the crEW tests from 1987 to 1989. Following these tests, which were designed to examine the question of integrating women, the Royal Canadian Navy continued to restrict women from taking on combat roles but opened the opportunity for women to serve aboard support vessels such as the diving support ship HMCS *Cormorant* – the vessel used during the SWintEr tests – which had an integrated crew until the ship was retired in 1997.¹⁰ After Parliament passed the Canadian *Human Rights Act* in 1977 and the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* was adopted in 1982, the RCN changed its policies to enable women to serve at sea in replenishment ships, which although not warships, serve in combat zones.¹¹

Although all military occupations were opened to women in 1989 following the order to remove the legal barriers to their employment,¹² women were still restricted from serving aboard submarines until 2001.¹³ This exception was justified by the fact that the *Oberon*-class submarines that the RCN had at the time were not fit to accommodate both genders due to space and privacy issues. When Canada acquired the *Victoria*-class submarines in the 1990s, the last restriction to the employment of women in the navy was lifted as the newer vessels are (relatively) more spacious and allow for more privacy. It is however important to note that the mixed-gender crew aboard the *Victoria*-class submarines is not segregated, meaning that both women and men bunk in the same quarters. After making the announcement, Commander of the Canadian Navy Vice-Admiral Greg Maddison was asked about crewing, and in particular on the targeted number of women to serve on submarines, to which he replied: “[w]e’re looking for the best people, the right people in terms of their skills and their capabilities and we have absolutely no target for either gender on board the vessels. We’re just looking for the right people.”¹⁴ Although a survey had shown that there was some reluctance among the male submariners to allow women to serve aboard submarines (only 27-30% supported the idea), Vice-Admiral Maddison explained that “when we did the same sort of polling during the 80s when we were introducing women on board

our ships that roughly the same percentage of men thought this wasn't a good idea and yet after 15 or 16 years this has been an extraordinary successful endeavour."¹⁵

The CAF pointed to the opening of submarine service to women as the beginning of a new chapter. One could therefore assume that the removal of the last gender-based employment barrier would lessen some of the difficulties of recruiting and encouraging women to enroll in the RCN and the CAF in general. However, many women serving today in the navy still face a variety of challenges that contribute to the difficulty of recruiting and retaining female sailors.

Contemporary Challenges and Career Development Barriers that Women Continue to Face

The challenges to women being fully integrated into the CAF in general, and the RCN in particular, can be placed into three categories. The first is legal barriers. As noted, these have been removed, and there are now no legal barriers to women serving in the navy – indeed, as noted earlier, getting women to serve is now a priority of the navy.

The second barrier could be called structural or accommodation. This means that in order for women to serve in ships, there had to be changes in the accommodations. In her article, "Learning how to be a Woman in the Canadian Forces," Nancy Taber describes the lack of accommodations and facilities for women as being a barrier, as female sailors are only allowed to serve on vessels equipped with designated female accommodations.¹⁶ With the exception of submarines, women are accommodated separately on ships. This means that crewing becomes more complicated – i.e., women need to be bunked with other women, and this needs to be assessed with the numbers of crew members. As long as berthing is not integrated, there will be accommodation issues on RCN ships. Going to sea without a full crew is not advisable especially on operations, hence all bunks need to be filled, which means filling both gender accommodations.

As well as establishing female accommodation on ships, there had to be some consideration of washroom facilities for women to ensure security and privacy. In general, these barriers have been overcome as older vessels which were initially designed for a single gender have been adapted so that they could accommodate both male and female sailors, and newer ships are constructed with accommodations for both genders.

The final category is cultural, or attitudinal. These challenges, not surprisingly, take longer to overcome. Employment barriers are far from being the only challenge that women in the RCN, and in the CAF in general, have had and continue to face. These challenges stem not only from the organizational culture but also its structure. A lot of these challenges, such as child care, spousal employment, lack of geographic stability, pregnancy leave, single parenthood, etc., have been identified as contributing factors to the difficulty of retaining women within the forces.¹⁷

Several studies have demonstrated that "there is a belief in some military organizations that in the navy, a woman's pregnancy is an excuse not to be sent to sea."¹⁸ Whether or not that continues to be the attitude, it is clear that women have concerns about the balance between their children and their career. Balancing military life with motherhood, combined with a certain lack of family support measures tends to lead to a higher number of women retiring from the forces in general when they start having children. If women do not retire but simply take maternity leave, then this can have implications for their career path and promotion prospects.

According to Taber, women leaving the military when they have children is not necessarily a cause-to-effect relationship but stems rather from structural issues.¹⁹ And as K. Davis puts it:

[t]he final decision to leave [...] was the result of ongoing discrimination associated with administrative and psychological isolation, and workplace perceptions surrounding maternity, family status, and gender roles. Women chose to leave when the organizational environment became a continuous source of stress which significantly compromised their quality of life.²⁰

Although family relations have changed over the years, it is still predominantly women who are responsible for child care. There have long been family support programs, but in general they tend to focus on support for women who are left at home when their husbands went to sea. This has begun to change. The Military Family Services program, which was launched in 1991, is still operating to support members but two new initiatives were launched in 2011 to connect military families to programs and resources more effectively. These services are accessible online through the FamilyForce.ca website and the Family Information Line.²¹

Pregnancy and family planning are not the only career development barriers that women in the navy continue to face. The issue of family and child care has affected the deployment of women on some longer operations. According to Taber, “[w]omen were actively prevented from going on these longer deployments that help them attain this ‘time in’ respect and opportunities for promotion, at a time when women were legally entitled to equal rights in the workplace.”²² Although Taber’s experience dates back to her service in the 1990s, these issues are still relevant today. I conducted a series of interviews with women currently serving in the RCN and this particular issue came up. One interviewee described how she had missed out on some sailing opportunities because of a lack of bunk space available for women. Lack of support for child care and lack of bunk space for women may affect their ability to deploy on longer operations – and that in turn may affect their career.

In the fall of 2016, the Auditor General of Canada released the *Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention* report. This report proposed a new program which would facilitate the move between the regular and the reserve forces as a solution and attempt to retain personnel, especially members wishing to start raising a family. As the report pointed out, this measure would enable members to “make sure they have their chance to take a break and come back without a penalty in how they’re getting paid, and certainly with the opportunity to continue contributing to ~~that~~ their pension fund.”²³ While the navy is two-pronged, with both regular and reserve forces, it operates under the ‘One Navy’ concept, meaning that reservists are trained and prepared in order to support the regular force through part-time and full-time service. As stated in the *Royal Canadian Navy Strategic Plan 2017-2022*, the Naval Reserve Evolution initiative “relies on the RCN’s ability to provide positive training experiences leading to common qualifications, exciting employment opportunities and meaningful career progression.”²⁴

Another big barrier that women in have faced is the problem of sexual harassment and the need for an organizational culture change within the forces. The CAF first introduced education with regard to sexual harassment in the mid-1990s. Although sexual harassment and racism prevention programs were introduced, over time this ceased to be a priority and commitment to the programs was inconsistent. It was not until 2014 that the CAF acknowledged the need to address the rampant problem of sexual harassment and sexual violence within the organization.²⁵ When the *External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces* conducted by former Supreme Court Judge Marie Deschamps came out in 2015, it stated that there is “an underlying sexualized culture in the CAF that is hostile to women and LGBTQ members, and conducive to more serious incidents of sexual harassment and assault.”²⁶ The

sexualized environment is described in the report as “characterized by the frequent use of swear words and highly degrading expressions that reference women’s bodies, sexual jokes, innuendos, discriminatory comments with respect to the abilities of women, and unwelcome sexual touching.”²⁷

In her 10 recommendations, Justice Deschamps called for a radical cultural change within the CAF to eliminate the sexualized environment. *Strong, Secure, Engaged* integrated these 10 recommendations within its mandate and created Operation Honour, which not only aims to eliminate inappropriate sexual behaviour, but also commits to respond better to such incidents, to support victims more efficiently and effectively, and ultimately to prevent such incidents from occurring.²⁸

The report also stressed the importance of improving the integration of women, especially in positions of senior leadership, as a key to implementing a culture change. This raises the question of promotion within the military which is a very sensitive one. Stating that it wants to ensure that women are filling positions of authority gives the impression among some men that their own chances of promotion will thereby be lessened. However, this will (hopefully) change when more women who pull their own weight and conduct themselves professionally illustrate that promotion is based on merit, not gender.

Another problem that has been seen in the military is that, due to gender stereotyping, it has been said that both men and women sometimes find it difficult to take orders from a woman. As well, according to Charlotte Holgersson, “the constructs of leaders and leadership stem from male norms or standards. As a result, women’s leadership tends to be evaluated on the basis of the prevailing male norms for leadership.”²⁹ In her article, Taber describes her experience of “socialization into the organizational culture” as having to adopt the masculine practices of the male members as a way to cope with the culture at the time. As she states, “[i]t was very easy to fall in with the men; in fact, it was much easier to become one of them and adapt their attitudes towards women than it was to dispute them. In that way, hopefully we could escape being a target.”³⁰

Taber’s experience is from a number of years ago, so I asked the interviewees about their thoughts on working in a male-dominated workplace and their views on the importance of having more women in the higher chain of command. While interviewees were unanimous that this was a very positive initiative, one of the respondents pointed out that this would not automatically rectify the problem as she had had to file more than one harassment complaint against female superiors. Another pointed out that “nearly as many women as men are culprits of the behaviours that create this tension in the work place.” Nevertheless, she reported that seeing more women higher in the chain of command is not only inspiring but also came as a “relief to have someone who understood what it was like for women.” As for the outcome and perspectives on Operation Honour, the interviewees seemed satisfied with the outcome so far, as they see it as an important and integral part of changing the organizational culture. There were however comments on the “poor delivery” of the message and the feeling, particularly among men, of “walking on egg shells” for fear of being charged for things that weren’t necessarily harassment but rather “misunderstood jokes or stories.” The CAF are however keeping track of the outcomes and delivery of Operation Honour and have identified the successful and less successful outcomes in the *Progress Report Addressing Sexual Misconduct*, published in February 2019. We can therefore expect these findings to shape the future of the implementation of the 10 recommendations set by Justice Deschamps in the coming years.

Recruiting and Retaining Women in the Royal Canadian Navy

As outlined in the previous section, the many challenges that women in the RCN face have caused some problems in terms of recruitment and retention, thus hindering the defence policy goal to attain a 25% representation of women within the CAF. In order to reach this target, the RCN has implemented a list of initiatives including: conducting internal research; developing a performance measurement framework; aligning diversity with command, management and leadership doctrine; conducting strategic communication; and improving health care, spirituality and family support. In terms of recruitment initiatives geared towards women, the RCN has the ‘Recruiter for a Day’ initiative in which recruitment for both the naval reserve units and the regular force is being promoted. A female representative is always present at these events to ensure not only representation of diversity, but also to address any questions or concerns from potential female candidates. There is also the ‘Ask Me Anything’ online chat group where women are available to answer questions. The ‘Point of Contact’ is another recruitment initiative which allows applicants to speak to someone who works in their area of interest. Finally, the RCN has released occupation videos which all have females as either narrators or subjects.³¹

In terms of retention, the RCN follows the Defence Team Departmental Plan 2019-2020 which tries to reflect the values and diversity of Canadian society, thus ensuring that both men and women are well supported throughout their military career, with the goal of retaining trained personnel. The Defence Team stresses the importance of implementing the 10 recommendations of the Deschamps Report but it also aims to implement the Employment Equity Plan. The latter identifies and addresses employment equity gaps and continues to implement the federal government’s Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.³² This strategy tracks the progress to address, not only employment with regards to equity but also diversity gaps at the senior levels. It also identifies opportunities that would support diversity and inclusion during the recruitment process and aims to remove systemic barriers in terms of human resources. Finally, other important elements are the initiatives that have been put in place to ensure that military families are well supported and remain resilient.³³

Moving Forward

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) have been hailed as being a world leader when it comes to the proportion of women in the ranks. As a member of NATO, Canada has been active in contributing to the integration of gender-based considerations in NATO-led operations.³⁴ The topic of gender perspectives in NATO-member armed forces rests on the principle that “the complementary skills of both male and female personnel are essential for the effectiveness of NATO operations,” and as such, the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives has been working with its members to integrate a gender perspective into the organization’s operations.³⁵

Having said that, however, women serving in the RCN have faced an array of barriers and challenges. Whether they were related to legal obstacles to employment, stemmed from the culture of the organization or from the organizational structure, there have been barriers along the way. Nonetheless, female sailors have persevered throughout the years and have greatly contributed to operational efforts, and through their struggles, they have brought about important changes as to how the RCN operates.

A great example of the progress that has been made over the past century is the appointment of Commodore Josée Kurtz to lead the Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2). When she was appointed to this role in mid-June 2019, the 31-year veteran became the first woman to command a standing NATO fleet. Commodore Kurtz has stated that this “sends a really strong signal to the newer generation of young people who want to do a military career, and I say that whether they are women, or men, or any minority group.”³⁶ With enough visibility, such a milestone might just be part of the solution to attracting more women to join the ranks of the RCN.

Without a doubt, Canadian women serving in the RCN have been pioneers who have paved the way for future generations aspiring to pursue a military career. Although they continue to face challenges in this still male-dominated work environment, their resilience is nothing but inspirational. When asked about their opinion regarding the ongoing challenges faced, the female sailors I interviewed unanimously stated that they would not be stopped. According to one, “I persevere for me, but I fight for the future women of our military.”

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Notes

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