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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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The recent allegations of inappropriate behaviour towards women subordinates against former Chief of the Defence Staff [Jonathan Vance](#), his successor, [Art MacDonald](#), and [others](#) among the top brass have shaken the Canadian military. The accusations reveal that Operation HONOUR, the “campaign plan” Vance initiated in 2016 when taking the role of chief of the Defence Staff, has failed in reaching its priority of “eradicat[ing] sexual misconduct.”

In the face of this new wave of allegations against the CAF’s most senior leaders, calls for a “comprehensive culture change,” initially advocated by former Supreme Court justice Marie Deschamps in 2015, have resurfaced. Professors Stefanie von Hlatky and Tandy Thomas [wrote](#) about the need for “a journey of culture change [that] needs to convey both shared responsibility for sexual misconduct but also, and perhaps more importantly, a shared vision of inclusion, dignity, and respect that transcends power hierarchies.”

Such a call is necessary. But it is also a vague, daunting task that if not explained, would not be pursued because of its herculean proportions. Outlining what culture change looks like can help foster buy-in throughout the organization, and can help alleviate some of the inevitable resistance culture change is to face.

What Does Successful Culture Change Look Like?

Culture is a complex concept that does not have a singular meaning. For the purpose of this paper, culture is the collection of [artifacts](#), values and beliefs that shapes, and is shaped by, an organization’s structure and its members’ behaviours. Asking for the military to change its culture means asking it to reshape service members’ attitudes and behaviours in order to create a new set of values and beliefs. In order to do so, culture change needs to address how the CAF functions as an institution and a system – the notion of culture encompasses how organizations and their structures influence and reinforce individual and collective behaviours.

Culture change is a difficult endeavour, but the process can be outlined in simple ways. In a paper commissioned by the Canadian Forces Strategic Response Team – Sexual Misconduct, Allan English outlines simple steps to change organizational culture: (1) a “coherent and holistic plan” created from empirical observations; (2) the selection of measurable, flexible and attainable goals that respond to the specific needs of the change; (3) a detailed outline and timeline; (4) a long-term vision for the change; and (5) a periodic evaluation of the plan.¹

¹Allan English, “Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault in the Canadian Armed Forces: Systemic Obstacles to Comprehensive Culture Change,” Paper presented at the IUS Canada Conference, Ottawa ON, October 2016.



The ability to put in place a plan and an implementation structure that would lead to the success of the culture change demands additional work from leaders. First, leaders ought to take the time to understand the culture they are trying to change. The work of experts from the past 30 years can provide insights as to what the cultural issues are and how the military needs to address them. Second, a solid monitoring structure, with the power to incentivize the CAF to pursue the change, is critical. There have been monitoring entities overseeing the military in the past – the most relevant being the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Minister’s Advisory Board on Gender Integration in the Canadian Forces, who were responsible for overseeing gender integration during the 1990s – but they have lacked the authority to hold the CAF accountable. Whatever the monitoring structure put in place, the ability to create incentives for the military to follow its recommendation is central to the success of culture change.

The necessity of an accountability and monitoring system ties into the most critical pieces of culture change: leadership buy-in, and especially at the most senior levels. The recent revelations about the limitations of Operation HONOUR clearly show that leadership commitment to this culture change was lacking. Former senior leaders themselves [acknowledged](#) as much.

Leadership buy-in may appear to be yet another vague concept, but it can be attained, through both repeated statements and tangible actions. First, leaders can establish a solid structure for change, based on the steps discussed above. Second, leaders need to consistently and continuously communicate their commitment to the change by adopting behaviours that are in line with their statements to their troops. All leaders need to develop buy-in; the senior leadership will establish the conditions for change at the institutional level, while commanding officers and junior leaders will need to put in place an environment conducive to the necessary attitudinal and behavioural change.

Buy-in does not demand we put unrealistic expectations on leaders and require them not to struggle with the change. Rather, to be credible and feel genuine, leaders should show commitment to the change through sustained actions and honesty. Acknowledging when mistakes are made and changing course when measures do not show the expected results are part of this work.

In fact, entrusting an external body to help guide change can be a powerful signal of leadership buy-in. By relinquishing control, leaders show that the change is more important than their own professional control over the organization and its culture. It is a display of commitment that can be sustained and expressed by implementing the recommendations and guidance from the agency overseeing the change.

Public statements do not suffice in encouraging and propelling change if the leadership does not also act to make that very change successful. In fact, when declarations contradict leaders’ actions, not only do leaders lose credibility, but change is slowed or halted.

Culture change can be easily presented through the following representation. Leadership buy-in is the foundation. Monitoring comes in to ensure the structure of the change is adequate, and that the plan, the goals, the outline, timeline and succession planning have the right objectives and the



intended effects. To produce results, external monitoring needs the power to hold the military to account. The [example](#) of the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Ministry Advisory Board on Gender Integration in the Canadian Forces is telling, as the consequences of their lack of tools to compel the military to implement their recommendations are still felt to this day. Establishing an accountability system within the change structure will serve to safeguard the foundations of change, thanks to the incentives it creates.

Motivating Culture Change

For a culture change as comprehensive as that demanded of the CAF to succeed, knowing the steps to take is not sufficient to obtain buy-in. Leaders need to understand why culture change is necessary. There are utilitarian and moral justifications for ending sexual misconduct in the CAF and fostering inclusion for marginalized groups, including women.

Diversity helps operational effectiveness

Leaders who engage in sexual misconduct in a modern military are not good leaders. If we look at sexual misconduct through the lens of dehumanization and abuse of power, those who engage in it are likely to be deficient in positive leadership skills. Good personnel management and team building are key parts of leadership requirements in a modern CAF, as they are tools to establish the trust that ensures operational effectiveness. A leader's sexual misconduct greatly hinders this trust. Additionally, those who engage in dehumanization and abuse of power through sexual misconduct are likely to dehumanize or abuse those under their command in other instances too.² Negative leadership behaviours have adverse effects on trust, morale and cohesion, all of which are key parts of operational effectiveness.

We also know that diverse teams work better and bring new and innovative ideas to the table. Arguments for diversity that centre on what marginalized groups bring to the table have been repeated many times over. Such instrumental arguments have not been enough to create buy-in at all levels because diversity initiatives have focused solely on increasing representation, instead of taking into account systemic barriers to the full participation of marginalized groups. The CAF should be more representative of the Canadian population, and should treat marginalized groups within the institution not just with respect and dignity (which amounts to basic human decency), but should actively include and protect marginalized groups by understanding that each group has different needs, and catering to these specific needs.

² Christian N. Thoroughgood, Brian W. Tate, Katrina B. Sawyer, and Rick Jacobs, "Bad to the Bone: Empirically Defining and Measuring Destructive Leader Behavior," *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 19 (2): 232.



Sexual misconduct is a security risk

Sexual misconduct is a clear and demonstrable security risk in the context of the CAF. As the allegations of February and March demonstrate, sexual misconduct goes all the way to the top. The proof that sexual misconduct is embedded at the highest levels of the institution also suggests that it is pervasive across all levels. Sexual misconduct at all levels, but especially during operations and at the top of the organization presents a security risk for many reasons, two of which are particularly important. First, the act of sexual misconduct itself breaks down group cohesion, fosters resentment and poisons the culture of entire units. The security risk here comes from a breakdown of trust, where there should be absolute trust, especially on operations and in leadership. Second, the replacement of service members at every level due to misconduct creates high rates of turnover, power vacuums and an environment where important briefings can be rushed and aspects of training overlooked. This can have severe implications for operations.

Sexual misconduct is a critical human rights issue

Women were allowed to serve in the military not because the CAF saw their potential, but because of equal opportunity and human rights legislation. The report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women of 1970 and section 15 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* were two documents that motivated the push for more inclusion in the military. In fact, the *Charter* was the main driver for the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal's [order](#) to open all military occupations to women and reach "gender integration in full" in the CAF within a decade. The tribunal viewed that the CAF did not prove that sex was a bona fide occupational requirement that allowed for discrimination under section 15. Today, women and other marginalized groups in the CAF continue to face discrimination, harassment and violence in the institution. In other words, sexual misconduct in the CAF is a critical human rights issue.

Conclusion

Culture change has come to mean everything and nothing all at once. Its common use has made this daunting task a frivolous buzzword. But by establishing clear steps, culture change can become an accessible process. The outline presented in this paper aims to provide a framework of what culture change in the CAF can look like, and the next action would be to create a strategy based on this.

The military has the know-how at its disposal. Advice to the CAF has often combined expert testimony with the testimony of victims and survivors, not just of sexual misconduct but of moments in the CAF's history such as the LGBT purge or gender integration. Combining expert and victim or survivor testimony is a useful model that should be continued. Collaboration should be encouraged between marginalized groups and experts to present their findings and tell their stories together. Experts, often academics, can provide the empirical data, while victims, survivors and marginalized people can testify to their lived experiences. Leaders must be confronted with the reality of harmful policy and policy failure, not just with the statistics.



Marginalized voices need to have power beyond parliamentary testimonies. Victims, survivors and others marginalized by the CAF should be asked what would have helped them feel safe and included. This is not to say that marginalized people should do all the work for the CAF or even that all of them want to, but there are certainly those who belong to more informal networks who have been asking for their voices to be heard. Testimony should not serve to simply shock leaders into making change: they should be shocked already. Instead, the stories from victims, survivors and other marginalized individuals contain the information necessary to confront and change culture.

Over the last 30 years, many recommendations have been made, but often the CAF has not implemented them due to pre-existing ideas of procedure and doctrine. A culture change is necessary, and if procedure and doctrine are preventing the safety and inclusion of marginalized groups, then it is procedure and doctrine that must adapt. The CAF must embrace change at every level and in every aspect of the institution, including in its various training institutions and programs, which stay with service members throughout their time in the CAF in multiple different forms and iterations.

The time for culture change has come, and it is now urgent. By outlining the broad strokes of what the CAF needs to do and why, we hope that the momentum is there for genuine, long-term progress.

► About the Author

Charlotte Duval-Lantoine is the Ottawa operations manager and a fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. She completed a master's in military history at Queen's University, during which she started researching the toxic culture of leadership in the Canadian Armed Forces during the 1990s and its impact on gender integration, which had begun in 1989. She continues to study leadership and culture change issues in the military in her free time. She obtained her BA in history and political science at McGill University in 2017. During her graduate studies, Charlotte served as the assistant to the executive director of Women in International Security-Canada for the fiscal year 2018-2019. She has also worked as a research assistant and translator on projects about gender mainstreaming and integration in NATO armed forces, and on the gendered dimension of veteran transition at Queen's University Centre for International and Defence Policy (CIDP).

Bibi Imre-Millei is an MA student in sociology at Queen's University, researching theoretical and methodological approaches to swarm drones in the media, information and surveillance stream. In 2020, she graduated with an MA in political studies with a thesis on biometrics in Iraq and Afghanistan, also from Queen's. Since 2019, Bibi has worked as the project coordinator for the Gender Lab at the Centre for International and Defence Policy where she researches gender in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and helps manage the Gender Lab's grants and team. Bibi is currently working on a project to map WPS expertise in Canada, and on a number of projects which engage with sexual misconduct and women's integration in the CAF.

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