

# How an anti-oppression framework can transform military cultures: Learning from the Canadian context

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# Overview

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- An anti-oppression lens on CAF's *evolution* of the warrior
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# Transforming Military Cultures

Transforming Military Cultures is a network of Canadian and international academic researchers, defence scientists, military members, veterans, and people with relevant lived experience who are collaborating to challenge, reimagine, and transform the Canadian Armed Forces culture into one that embraces inclusivity and difference.

The Network employs an anti-oppression framework in drawing on diverse critical perspectives and international lessons learned.

Our activities aim to determine the root causes of the problematic military culture and provide practical insights to help transform Canadian Armed Forces culture into one that serves the future needs of Canada and Canadians.

# Understanding the Canadian context

- **Investigative reporting**
  - incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault, with a culture of “unbridled promiscuity, where harassment is common, heavy drinking is a way of life” (O’Hara, 1998)
  - continued harassment and assault of women, often in the name of “esprit de corps” (Mercier & Castonguay, 2014)
- **External review report**
  - CAF’s sexualized culture results in the sexual harassment and assault of women and LGBTQ members (Deschamps, 2015)
- **Class action lawsuits**
  - discrimination based on sexual orientation (LGBT Purge)
  - sexual assault, sexual harassment, and discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation (Heyder-Beattie)
  - systemic racial discrimination and harassment
- **Sexual misconduct crisis**
  - high-ranking military officers accused of sexual misconduct (Pugliese, 2021)
- **External review report**
  - ongoing systemic problems with a “toxic and sexist culture” in the CAF (Arbour, 2022)
- **Minister’s advisory panel report**
  - systemic racism and legacy of colonialism in DND/CAF (2022)

# Current culture change initiatives

- Initiating Directive of Chief Professional Conduct and Culture (CPCC) promised “a fundamentally new approach to address the root causes of systemic misconduct” (GoC, 2021).
- culture consultations
- four pillars with "supportive" and "limiting mindsets"
  - service before self
  - warrior identity
  - leadership
  - teamwork
- culture "evolution"

# An anti-oppression framework

- recognizes that patriarchy, settler-colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and ableism are interlocking structures that can result in individual discriminatory actions and systemic inequalities
- interrogates power imbalances and intersectionality
- deploys strategies, theories, and actions that challenge social and historical inequities and injustices that are systemic in institutions with policies and practices that allow certain groups to dominate other groups

An anti-  
oppression lens  
on  
*CAF's evolution of  
the warrior*

- addressing the legacy of the root causes of patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and ableism—as they have shaped the CAF's culture—is key for transformative change
- need to problematize root causes, norms, and standards that continue to privilege a specific warrior ideal of military membership; and, the hierarchy of service and injury with a related reproduction of harm that values masculinized combat over feminized support.

# Root causes: The problems with the warrior ideal are structural

- proposed evolution of the warrior identity does not name root causes
- “bravery, professional excellence, and a tradition of heroism” are noted as “strengths” (GoC 2022a) but are historically and conceptually tied to problematic notions of masculinity, coloniality, heteronormativity, and ability
- warrior ideal affected by legacy of:
  - colonialism
  - women's combat exclusion
  - LGBT Purge



# Problems with the warrior ideal are structural

## "Limitations" (GoC, 2022b)

- "narrow view of the ideal warrior"
- "all others in service of the warrior" (GoC, 2022b)
- "promotes toxic and aggressive behaviours"

## Root causes (TMC)

- identify who is excluded or marginalized in a warrior ideal
- identify the privileging of the warrior itself
- name how individualized behaviours are linked to structural root causes

## Norms and standards: Reproducing the warrior ideal

- proposed evolution of warrior identity aims to “recognize that warriors should be both physically fit and emotionally adaptable” (GoC, 2022b)
- reproduces ableist ideas of physical fitness and a binary gendered view of physicality/emotionality
- an inclusive design of policies and standards would mean taking seriously the diverse bodies and experiences of CAF members, instead of basing them on a male warrior ideal (Eichler, 2021)

# Reproducing the warrior ideal

## "Strengths" (GoC, 2022b)

- "tradition of heroism" (GoC, 2022b)
- CAF ethos, "Trusted to Serve" (CDS, 2022) calls for a "balanced total health and wellness approach" with members demonstrating "total commitment to the military profession" in "specific situations"
- "fighting spirit" with "an unwavering will to succeed, requires grit and the will to fight against all adversity"

## Reproduction of warrior ideal (TMC)

- values specific type of "real fighter" who is a "soldier-first"
- Universality of Service order and soldier first principle limit service of those with long-term disabilities, medical concerns, familial responsibilities, and/or religious requirements.
- male standards determine design of bathrooms, accommodations, equipment, uniforms, vehicles, and medical care

Hierarchy of  
service and  
injury, and the  
potential  
reproduction  
of harm:  
Who is the  
“real” soldier?

- gendered hierarchy of service and occupation, with those associated with combat—and thus with the warrior ideal—at the top of the hierarchy
- dominant narrative of hypermasculinity constructs the standard for military service and those that deviate from this standard are positioned lower on the hierarchy (Taber, 2018)
- particular racialized men are often feminized within CAF and struggle to adjust and adapt to dominant CAF culture and aspects of the warrior ideal (George, 2016)
- hierarchy of trauma (Callaghan, Eichler, & Tait, in press)

# Who is the “real” soldier?

- operators privileged over support trades in the evolving military culture
- certain experiences at the centre of the construction of the warrior ideal
- pillars and stated descriptions, strengths, and cultural evolution are socially constructed, but are presented as neutral, outside of relations of power, and essential to the military structure itself
- pillars themselves exclude members and reproduce harm

# Implications and conclusions

- efforts to adjust the warrior identity being undertaken without naming root causes and foundational norms that inform the warrior ideal and construct a hierarchy of service and injury, thus reproducing harm to those who do not fit the implicit male, masculinist, able-bodied, white, and heteronormative ideal
- current *culture evolution* efforts still invested in an ideal of military membership linked to military masculinity and defined by uniformity, strength, sacrifice, and adherence to a warrior ideal
- an anti-oppression framework allows us to see how power is reproduced and consolidated by *evolving* rather than fundamentally challenging and transforming key military cultural tenets like the warrior ideal

# Implications and conclusions

- How does an expanded or evolved warrior identity contribute to problems in the military's culture by leaving intact and unnamed the root causes of patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and ableism?
- Is it possible to think of operational effectiveness differently and not contingent on a warrior ideal?
- Is the warrior ideal necessary and useful in all operations?
- What alternative constructions of military identity are possible and needed to address the complex security challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- Without explicitly naming how root causes shape structures and ideals, and dismantling the power linked to them, military culture efforts will yield only limited results.

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