

ENGAGING WITH THE MILITARY: CRITICAL FEMINIST REFLECTIONS

MAYA EICHLER, TAMMY GEORGE, AND NANCY TABER



All rights reserved. No part of this paper may be reproduced without the prior written permission from the TMC Network.

Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) Network
Mount Saint Vincent University
Centre for Social Innovation and
Community Engagement in Military Affairs
166 Bedford Highway, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3M 2J6, Canada
www.msvu.ca/tmc
tmc@msvu.ca

Suggested citation:

Eichler, M., George, T., & Taber, N. (2024). *Engaging with the military: Critical feminist reflections [Working paper]*. Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) Network.

Funding Acknowledgement:

This paper was published by the Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) Network which receives funding from the Mobilizing Insights in National Defence and Security (MINDS) program designed to facilitate collaboration and mobilize knowledge between the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and academia and other experts on defence and security issues. Through its Targeted Engagement Grants, collaborative networks, scholarships, and expert briefings, MINDS works and collaborates with key partners to strengthen the foundation of evidence-based defence policy making. These partnerships drive innovation by encouraging new analyses of emerging global events, opportunities, and crises, while supporting a stronger defence and security dialogue with Canadians.

This paper is based on the analysis of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the perspective of the funder.



Introduction

In this working paper, we share our experiences co-directing the Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) collaborative network. TMC is funded by the Department of National Defence (DND) Mobilizing Insights into National Defence and Security (MINDS) program, which identified culture change as a key policy challenge area for 2022-2025. The network is comprised of Canadian and international academic researchers, defence scientists, military members, veterans, youth, and people with relevant lived experience, and takes a feminist intersectional trauma-informed approach to reimagine and transform the culture of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). It is well documented that the CAF has a long-standing problem with gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault within its ranks.¹ We argue that what DND/CAF positions as an individualized problem of “sexual misconduct” is in fact a structural problem of an institutional culture that creates the conditions for sexualized violence; intersects with ableism, colonialism, homophobia, racism, and sexism; and requires transformative change.

As DND MINDS-funded TMC co-directors, we engage directly with the military and with military personnel, which has required difficult, and at times uncomfortable, conversations which have been replete with both possibilities and limitations. Our engagement with the CAF has been intended to facilitate open-ended critical thinking, perspective sharing, reflexivity, and assumption challenging, all of which are difficult tasks in the context of a masculinized militarized power-laden organization, in which vulnerability and uncertainty are viewed as weaknesses instead of as opportunities for learning.² In this working paper, we explore these possibilities and tensions by presenting how each of us has arrived at this work, explaining the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of TMC and how they relate to DND/CAF’s ongoing culture change efforts, and discussing what we have learned through our culture change work with DND/CAF.

... what DND/CAF positions as an individualized problem of “sexual misconduct” is in fact a structural problem.

The story of our arrival: Researcher positionalities

One of the key principles of our approach to this network is foregrounding lived experience to recognize our own positionality and examine it reflexively.³ Central to critical feminisms, Goodkind et al. describe the importance of positionality as “being transparent and reflexive in analyzing and detailing the impact of who we are on the research we conduct—in terms of questions we ask, methods we use and our interpretations and analysis of our data.”⁴ Describing our positionalities, an essential component of critical feminist praxis, is a way of practicing accountability for who we are, the conceptual and empirical approaches we take, and what we deem important. Following the words of feminist scholar Sara Ahmed,⁵ we begin this section with the stories of our own arrival to this work. While we as TMC co-directors approach the work of military culture change with similar feminist understandings, we have arrived at this work from different backgrounds, disciplines, and experiences.

Maya Eichler comes to this work from an international perspective, as an immigrant mixed-race cisgender settler woman. Having grown up in Europe, in a multicultural household and with parents who had experience in both defence work and peace advocacy, her scholarship has focused on the organization of armed forces in a variety of geographic contexts (e.g., Russia, United States, and Canada). With degrees in political science from the University of Vienna and York University, Maya approaches her research informed by feminist scholarship in international relations and by the interdisciplinary field of critical military studies. She has published on the Russian military,⁶ globally operating private security companies,⁷ gender and Canadian defence issues,⁸ and military and veteran

health and well-being,⁹ among other topics. During her decade-long tenure as Canada Research Chair at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Maya has also conducted community-engaged research, facilitating dialogue between disparate communities such as CAF veterans, refugees, peace activists, and artists.¹⁰ In her qualitative research with veterans of the CAF, Maya found that many shared their story with her because they wanted to see meaningful change to CAF policies and practices. This led her to contribute beyond the academy by, for example, providing advice to DND/CAF and VAC, giving parliamentary testimony, and serving as subject matter expert in the implementation of the final settlement agreement of the Heyder-Beattie military sexual misconduct class action. Maya has worked with the founder of It's Just 700 and helped co-found the Women Veterans Research and Engagement Network. Her interest in military culture change is driven by her feminist scholarship, her research with veterans, and her engagement with the women veteran and military sexual trauma advocacy community. She believes strongly that the transformation of military culture requires dialogue and collaboration across military-civilian lines, academic and practitioner lines, and across national borders.

Tammy George is a cisgender settler woman of colour who comes to this work through her interdisciplinary background in health sciences, education, sociology, and gender studies. For years she trained as a competitive athlete, grappling with many of the same themes that are central to military service, such as masculinities, moral injury, discipline, hierarchies, and meritocracy. She came to understand the deep connection and symbiotic relationship, both historical and contemporary, between sport and militarism. In addition to sport and health, Tammy has focused her teaching and research on the intersection of racial violence, critical military studies, and mental health in the post 9/11 era. She came to this work through her travels and her experience working alongside the American military in both Southeast Asia and the United States. Her doctoral research at the University of Toronto examined how racialized soldiers negotiate national belonging, subjectivity, and organized violence in the Canadian context.¹¹ Her research reframed

understandings of traditional military service and military sacrifice, and opened up possibilities for looking at military service from the vantage point of the racialized soldier. This research revealed that, for the racialized soldier, the negotiation of white supremacy and modern-day military life is complex and problematic. The racialized soldier is a significant and contradictory figure in that they not only seek protection from the nation, but are quite literally the figure that protects the racial state by engaging in its violence globally. Presently a faculty member at York University in Toronto, Canada, Tammy's teaching and research have inspired her to become a psychoanalytic psychotherapist working with veterans and those who suffer from the complexities of structural violence. Tammy has served as a panellist and guest speaker at a variety of events pertaining to health, mental health, and racism in Canada. She has also participated in several events and consultations with DND/CAF, including being a guest speaker and workshop consultant to the 32 Canadian Forces Health Services (CF H Svcs C) Pilot Anti-Racism Strategies Workshop. Tammy continues to advocate that understanding both structural inequities and the role of health is central to questions of culture change.

Nancy Taber is a white cisgender settler-Canadian who grew up in a military family, joined the military herself at age seventeen, graduated from Royal Military College, and served as a Sea King helicopter air navigator Tactical Coordinator at MH 423 Squadron (12 Wing Shearwater), deploying on HMCS Iroquois, Athabaskan, and Toronto. As she was completing her Short Service Engagement, she enrolled in a Master of Education program at Mount Saint Vincent University in order to support her secondary duty in Workplace Relations at 12 Wing Shearwater. In that program, she learned about feminist theories, beginning to understand the gendered nature of her military service from a structural perspective, in that her own individual experience was tied to collective institutional policies and practices.¹² After releasing from the military, she earned a PhD with the University of South Australia, eventually deciding to conduct her dissertation research on the intersecting ruling relations of motherhood and the military in regard to women's experiences

serving in the CAF.¹³ She encountered military resistance to this research, which resulted in her deciding to use her own experiences as an entry point into her institutional ethnography about mothering in the military.¹⁴ Throughout her almost twenty-year academic career, Nancy's work has focused on differing contexts, such as militaries, emergency response, memoirs and novels, heritage sites and museums, popular culture, and post-secondary institutions, with the through line being her exploration of the intersection of gender, militarism, and learning using an adult education antimilitarist lens,¹⁵ for which she was inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame. She has provided advice, recommendations, and training to DND/CAF, given Senate testimony, and served as an expert witness for the Heyder-Beattie class action as well as subject matter expert for the Final Settlement Agreement Schedule O consultations on gender and diversity in DND/CAF. She conducts fiction-based research to explore the complex experiences of women as relates to war and militaries.¹⁶ She is a facilitator for A Force for Women: Her Story with Writers Collective of Canada, a workshop series for woman-identifying Canadians who have served in the military.

As co-directors of TMC, we complement each other through our different disciplinary backgrounds of politics, health, and adult education. We believe that such a multidisciplinary approach is essential to addressing the complex problems of military culture and culture change, instead of the narrow institutional organizational psychology approach that has traditionally been used within DND/CAF. Together, we also believe in the feminist principle of centering the voices and needs of those with lived experience over the needs of those with institutional or political power and privilege. Finally, we collectively value the importance of dialogue and conversation across diverse disciplines and experiences to achieve transformative change. With these principles in mind, we developed our unique approach which drives the culture change work of TMC.

The TMC Network's approach to military culture change

Over the past several decades, DND/CAF has attempted to eliminate sexual harassment and sexual assault with a variety of strategies focused on changing individual behaviour, including training sessions such as Standard for Harassment and Racism Prevention (SHARP) and Respect in the CAF: Take a Stand against Sexual Misconduct, as well as mission orders such as Operation HONOUR. We argue that this approach is insufficient; what is needed is wide-scale cultural change that will acknowledge, address, and cease the institutional harm that service in the CAF can cause its personnel. Our aim with the TMC Network is to make feminist critique central to discussions about DND/CAF culture change, which is one of the reasons we named our network *Transforming Military Cultures*. For us, transformation means significant structural change that problematizes military expectations, norms, traditions, and values, as relates to DND/CAF policies, practices, training, and systems that institutionally privilege the image of the ideal warrior (a white male who is always available to train and deploy, throughout the entirety of his career).¹⁷ In devising the focus for our three-year collaborative network, we framed our work around three series of questions:

- ▶ Year 1: What is the problem we are trying to solve? How do we understand the problem of culture change in the CAF through an anti-oppression lens?
- ▶ Year 2: What are the alternatives? How can an understanding of lived experiences and root causes assist in envisioning an alternative military culture that values inclusivity and difference?
- ▶ Year 3: How do we bring about meaningful change? How can an anti-oppression framework inform change strategies?

DND/CAF approaches have also tended to silo various issues from one another—including sexual misconduct, racism, and homophobia—while we have argued for an integrated approach. Addressing the military's culture problem is not just about focusing on “sexual misconduct or homophobia or racism or the legacies of colonialism—but understanding them all as interrelated root causes.”¹⁸ Central to

TMC is an anti-oppression framework that derives from the work of critical feminists like Kimberlé Crenshaw¹⁹ who argue that gender oppression and marginalization intersect with racism and other structures such as heteronormativity, colonialism, and ableism. Furthermore, TMC takes a trauma-informed approach that focuses on “those harmed and puts emphasis on facilitating their healing. This healing is also grounded in structural accountability and thinking through what it means to minimize harm across institutional life for its most vulnerable members.”²⁰ Strategies for change, we have found, ideally go beyond an individualized and siloed approach to consider intersecting structural causes, impacts on lived experience, and multiple creative entry points for dialogue and collaboration that can enable transformation.

In our work as TMC co-directors, we have continually asked ourselves: How can we bridge critical theory with the practice of military culture change? How can we learn from those with relevant lived experiences, especially those who have been harmed by the institution and whose voices have been dismissed? How can we engage in caring, difficult, productive, and creative conversations about transforming military cultures? How can we bridge the civilian-military and academic-practitioner divides? These questions are at the centre of what we have done as a network—in our organizing of roundtables, symposiums, webinars, and workshops, as well as the development of working papers, infographics, and other network resources. In thinking through these questions and organizing events that help us reflect on them, we have drawn on our past experiences and have been informed by our positionalities. Maya has brought in international connections and members from the women veteran and military sexual trauma advocacy community as well as the peace activist community. Tammy has utilized connections from her work in health and sports. Nancy has drawn on her military and adult education background, as well as contributed to the creative writing initiatives of TMC.

Our events have included webinars on international perspectives on transforming military cultures, anti-oppression and trauma-informed approaches, critical military education, and Indigenous perspectives. In our events, we have foregrounded the voices of those with lived experience, such as the keynote speaker for our first symposium who talked about her memoir *Girls Need Not Apply: Field Notes from the Forces*,²¹ as well as the opening panel for our second annual symposium that featured the voices of military sexual trauma and Purge survivors.²² We have also highlighted how culture change—and resistance—is happening on every military base and in every military unit across the country, as well as across other national institutions, through a panel on grassroots initiatives and other sectors at our second TMC symposium.²³ Additionally, we have engaged in creative and expressive writing activities with network members and symposium attendees in order to find alternative ways to explore, engage with, and (re)imagine military culture change.²⁴

Strategies for change, we have found, ideally go beyond an individualized and siloed approach to consider intersecting structural causes, impacts on lived experience, and multiple creative entry points for dialogue and collaboration that can enable transformation.

Our network's approach to critical culture change work was showcased in a special issue of the *Canadian Military Journal* that we co-edited. Significantly, the contributors to the special issue came from across military, civilian, academic and practitioner lines. Many were former or current Defence Team members. As we stated in our editorial introduction, the aim of the special issue was to “provide readers with insights and recommendations for meaningful military culture change.”²⁵ The articles examined a host of topics in relation to military culture change, such as the root causes of the military's problematic culture, the experiences of racialized military members, evolving military identities, military family norms and policies, critical feminist approaches to education in the military, a trauma-informed lens on military culture change, women and feminism in the military context, the use of regimental ritual objects, and perspectives from Chief Professional Conduct and Culture (CPCC) and youth.

The evidence provided in the special issue, as we have written previously, highlighted the need to

- Name the root causes of harm in the CAF as relates to colonialism, racism, homophobia, sexism, and ableism.
- Challenge the image of an ideal warrior to create one which embraces inclusive military membership.
- Recognize how root causes and the valuing of a specific type of warrior are structurally embedded in DND/CAF policies, practices, traditions, education, informal learning, and rituals.
- Rewrite related policies and reconsider related practices to foster inclusivity; assert that, instead of asking members to conform to CAF ideals, the CAF itself should change.
- Be trauma-informed in recognizing how the CAF can cause harm, and in rectifying that harm.
- Treat CAF members as whole embodied beings who have diverse needs and families.
- Incorporate critical education into all aspects of the CAF education system.²⁶

Through our special issue and other TMC work, we have built on an anti-oppression framework to generate critical and innovative ideas to inform DND/CAF's culture change efforts. As we have argued, military culture change is possible with the adoption of concrete perspectives, approaches, and recommendations.

DND/CAF responses to calls for culture change²⁷

In response to the 2021 military sexual misconduct crisis, CPCC was created, tasked with “aligning Defence culture to ensure professional conduct meets the standards expected of the profession of arms and the Defence Team.”²⁸ The Initiating Directive of CPCC promised “a fundamentally new approach to address the root causes of systemic misconduct.”²⁹ The directive acknowledged the limitations of past approaches that focused on symptoms and ordered members to behave differently. One of the tasks of CPCC is to lead “institutional efforts to develop a professional conduct and culture framework that

holistically tackles all types of discrimination, harmful behaviour, biases and system barriers.”³⁰

From October 2021 to March 2022, CPCC engaged in a culture consultation process, led by CPCC and the consulting firm McKinsey.³¹ Based on these consultations, CPCC developed a framework consisting of four pillars that define Defence Team culture: service before self, warrior identity, leadership, and teamwork. These four pillars are described as having both strengths and limitations, or “supportive mindsets” and “limiting mindsets.”³² As stated on the Government of Canada webpage summarizing the results of the consultation: “Mindsets are directly tied to behaviours, and it is only by evolving the mindsets that underpin our culture that we can ensure a sustainable and irreversible change in behaviour.”³³ We argue this focus on mindsets continues to position the problem of culture change using an individual framework, which does not provide a fundamentally new approach to culture change.

DND/CAF’s approach to culture change has also continued to prioritize operational effectiveness and warrior identity despite an ostensible shift in language. The most recent iteration of the CAF ethos, “Trusted to Serve,”³⁴ calls for a “balanced total health and wellness approach” with members demonstrating “total commitment to the military profession” in “specific situations.” Military personnel are no longer officially positioned as “warriors,” but are expected to have a “fighting spirit” with “an unwavering will to succeed, [that] requires grit and the will to fight against all adversity,” including with respect to culture change. However, this revised ethos must be examined in conjunction with the Universality of Service order and the soldier-first principle, which contains the “requirement to be physically fit, employable and deployable for general operational duties,”³⁵ as well as the related Minimum Operational Standards.³⁶ This order, principle, and the minimum standards limit the service of those with identity facets or commitments that might interfere with these foundational tenets, such as those with long-term disabilities, medical concerns, familial responsibilities, and/or religious requirements.³⁷ As such, DND/CAF continues to value bodies

and social locations that privilege white able-bodied men.³⁸ The CAF ethos does position “inclusion” as one of six military values, in that inclusion is intended to “create an environment where everyone can bring their authentic selves to work.”³⁹ But we question whether this is possible in an organization that continues to systematically value a particular warrior ideal, especially with respect to the soldier-first principle which requires, beyond a few exceptions, that military personnel be available and able to deploy, at any time, in operational roles.⁴⁰ These and related traditions, policies, and practices are viewed as sacrosanct, while the impact of structures like patriarchy are rarely recognized or interrogated.

Finally, DND/CAF’s approach to culture change has emphasized evolution over transformation. By 2022, CPCC had increasingly replaced the language of *change* with the language of *evolution*⁴¹ and *enhancement*.⁴² The implication is that a radical transformation of the military’s culture is not needed but rather that it is sufficient to adjust it by evolving it—by enhancing existing strengths and reducing existing limitations. In November of 2022, the *Together-Stronger, Diversity of Service-Unity of Purpose Defence Team Culture Evolution Strategy* was released on a limited basis, intended to “unify the multitude of culture evolution efforts already underway across our institution, including the measures we are taking in response to external reviews.”⁴³ The focus, in the title and in the Foreword signed by the DM, CDS, and Chief Warrant Officer (CWO, CPCC), is on evolution, sending the message that, despite evidence to the contrary, DND/CAF’s culture does not need to be changed, reformed, or transformed, but simply evolved from its historical roots, despite Canada’s embeddedness in the legacies of colonialism. However, in the Introduction, signed by the Associate Assistant Deputy Minister (AADM), Chief Professional Conduct and Culture (CPCC), and Command Chief Warrant Officer (CCWO) the phrase “transforming our culture” is used (ii), with the recognition that “creat[ing] a healthier workplace is ... not only the right thing to do, it will make us more operationally effective.” The signatories state that culture has “positive and negative aspects” and “the way culture is expressed in our teams does not always align with our ethos and stated values.”⁴⁴

This statement implies that the issue is with how culture is expressed, not with how a problematic culture is structurally embedded in the CAF, a position that is also reflected in the statement, “each member of the CAF and each DND public servant is responsible for conducting themselves with integrity, honour, and in ways that align with our values as an institution.”⁴⁵ Culture improvements are framed as “being a positive role model, treating all people with respect, speaking and acting in an inclusive and empathetic way, and providing informed support to peers and subordinates when harm has occurred,” situating culture change once again as the responsibility of individuals, not wide-scale institutional structures, despite recognition of “poor or inadequate systems, processes, and practices of the institution.”⁴⁶

While TMC provided feedback on the development of the *Culture Evolution Strategy*, some of which is reflected in the document, the institution has continued to position culture change in terms of evolution or growth. These terms send the message that the CAF does not need to transform (despite massive amounts of evidence to the contrary) but simply strengthen what is “good,” with anything that is “bad” being due to a problematic few who should be trained to adopt a supportive mindset or be released.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, what is conceptualized as “good” from the position of the institution is too often harmful to CAF members. For instance, military personnel who come forward with allegations of sexual violence can be accused of not practicing service before self and teamwork, in that they are not putting the needs of the organization and the unit before their own.⁴⁸

Additionally, we have encountered a general reluctance to name root causes, apply a thorough SGBA/GBA Plus analysis, and centre those who have been harmed. Certainly, some change is occurring but, as change has been conceptualized as evolution, we also see a hearkening back to old approaches focused on individual behaviours over institutional responsibility. As TMC co-directors, we are not convinced that ongoing DND/CAF culture change efforts qualify as “a fundamentally new approach to address the root causes of systemic misconduct” just yet.⁴⁹ However, we believe that this iterative, often

fraught process of engagement between critical feminist scholars like ourselves and the institution is an important part of the ongoing process of transformative change itself.

Possibilities, limitations, and tensions of feminist engagement with the military

In our work as TMC co-directors, we have had ongoing discussions about how feminist scholars can work with powerful institutions like the military. We recognize that many feminists prefer to remain on the outside and are reluctant to engage with militaries. Feminists who do work with militaries express the unease, quandaries, and ethical challenges that arise from engaging with such an institution.⁵⁰ We continually ask: What are the ethics of engaging in work with an institution that was designed to be hierarchical, violent, and oppressive? In our research and engagement with DND/CAF, do we risk perpetuating the status quo and enabling further violence and oppression? Is the military simply performing culture change as a public relations exercise, with little intention of implementing substantive and consequential changes? Considering these questions, what are the possibilities and limitations of engaging with the military as feminist scholars? Below we outline some of the main tensions we have encountered in our own TMC work.

There is no doubt that leading a DND MINDS-funded collaborative network has afforded us a unique opportunity to collaborate directly with DND/CAF and have an (albeit limited) impact on policy. Early in our three-year grant, we developed terms of reference with CPCC and established a close working relationship with our counterparts within DND/CAF. We engaged in multiple conversations with Defence Team members about culture change and provided timely advice as new policies and programs were being developed. Through this close collaboration, TMC leveraged unique insights and productive questions, and thus contributed new ideas to the ongoing culture change conversation. In addition, by hosting webinars and annual symposia, TMC helped build an internationally-spanning educational and discursive platform reaching military members,

civilians, academics, and practitioners alike. As such, TMC fostered a community across military-civilian lines comprised of those committed to finding nuanced and creative ways to transform oppressive and harmful military cultures. We aimed to create “spaces for difficult conversations”⁵¹ in which we centre voices that are less likely to be heard and amplified, including those of survivors of military sexual misconduct, Purge survivors, and military personnel doing culture change work on the ground.

One of the key limitations we have faced in our work is related to the military as an organization. The CAF was created as a colonial institution at a structural level, which intersects with individual beliefs, actions, and experiences.⁵² There is entrenched resistance to transforming any aspect of CAF culture that is tied to honoured traditions which are viewed as essential aspects of the CAF.⁵³ Institutional resistance to naming the root causes of military culture problems and to changing key elements of the culture means that the ideas TMC brings to DND/CAF have less appeal than those of other external stakeholders. Certainly, external consultants such as McKinsey, which advise that what is necessary is merely changing individual mindsets, not the organization as a whole, seem more palatable to senior leaders.⁵⁴ We have often reflected on whether the military is politically empowered to truly engage with external researchers and civilians who bring the kind of critical lens to culture change work that TMC does. Is it really possible for those we work with in DND/CAF to set aside or even critique their institutional identity, when what members of the Defence Team can say seems to be curtailed by cultural, institutional, and political expectations? If we cannot speak freely to each other, how do we build a genuine relationship of understanding and collaboration across military-civilian lines?

As TMC co-directors, we see that our critical feminist engagement with DND/CAF has allowed for a greater questioning of assumptions, interrogating of the status quo, and highlighting of how power operates within the CAF. Through our work with TMC we were also

able to stress the importance of naming ableism, colonialism, homophobia, racism, and sexism as root causes of the military's problematic culture that are embedded in structural policies and practices, not as individual issues. We learned that our critical feminist engagement contributed to transformative culture change by facilitating dialogue between practitioners and scholars from a variety of differing contexts, including across military-civilian lines. From our experience, we learned that it is important to be ready for the resistance one encounters as critical feminist scholars and to be alert to the tensions between being performatively co-opted and working for meaningful change. We believe DND/CAF would benefit from recognizing that engaging in new ways with external partners who bring in innovative critical perspectives is a key part of transforming military culture. We found that critical feminist engagement with DND/CAF illustrates what is required for the transformation of military culture: a radically new way of thinking informed by critical feminist-informed theories, collaboration across military-civilian lines, ongoing reflexivity, focus on relevant lived experiences, openness to uncomfortable conversations, attention to how power operates, and challenging of taken-for-granted assumptions.

Conclusion

Our work leading TMC has reaffirmed both the importance of recognizing and critiquing the root causes of the CAF's problematic culture as well as the intense resistance from some sectors of DND/CAF to the naming and addressing of these causes, which inhibits change. Efforts to change CAF culture in ways that would end discrimination, sexism, racism, homophobia, and colonialism have been largely insufficient to date. Sexual violence in the military cannot be addressed and eliminated without taking a different approach to culture change and transforming the military-civilian relationship. A critical feminist engagement with the military, as we modeled through TMC, is one such approach.

Culture change work not only benefits from, but requires, collaboration with those engaged in culture change research outside the military and those who are creating positive change on the ground in military contexts. Also, centering, listening to, and learning from those who have been harmed is key to moving toward meaningful change. As critical feminist scholars we have argued that structural change with respect to military cultures, policies, practices, and education is necessary and possible. TMC has aimed to support this structural change by “daring to disrupt the status quo in envisioning alternatives for military culture.”⁵⁵

...critical feminist engagement with DND/CAF illustrates what is required for the transformation of military culture:

- *radically new way of thinking informed by critical feminist-informed theories*
- *collaboration across military-civilian lines*
- *ongoing reflexivity*
- *focus on relevant lived experiences*
- *openness to uncomfortable conversations*
- *attention to how power operates*
- *challenging taken-for-granted assumptions*

Despite our critical feminist engagement with the military, there remains a significant gap between our approach and DND/CAF's approach to culture change, which highlights the limitations of this type of collaboration. While some individuals in the DND/CAF desire transformation on an institutional level, others are more focused on specific changes at the individual or policy levels that keep CAF culture as a whole intact. We have experienced resistance to challenging and reimagining military norms with respect to who is viewed as an ideal warrior, what the core of valued military service is believed to be, and how these factors result in the overwhelming recruitment, retention, and promotion of white cisgender male personnel. As the work on culture change progresses, we will continue to ask the questions: Are DND/CAF and the Government of Canada serious about military culture change, or are they too focused

on maintaining the status quo? How can the status quo be meaningfully challenged on an individual and structural level? And how can we continue to work together across military-civilian lines to achieve the transformation of military culture so that it ceases to harm military members?

After our time working on TMC, we feel incredibly grateful for the conversations and relationships we were able to foster with both DND/CAF and within the TMC Network. These conversations and relationships certainly challenged the status quo and enabled seeds of transformation to be sown. At the same time, we have witnessed the political and institutional limitations of working with DND/CAF as it struggles to adapt and respond to, and too often resists, external pressures for change. Fundamentally, it would be necessary for DND/CAF (and other government departments seeking change) to go beyond a narrow understanding of external engagement as the consumption of external expertise. Meaningful engagement between critical feminist scholarship and the military institution ultimately requires a willingness to build genuine relationships, centre people with lived experience, and challenge existing power relations.

Endnotes

1. The Honourable Louise Arbour, *Report of the Independent External Comprehensive Review of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces*, External Review (Borden Ladner Gervais, May 20, 2022). <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/report-of-the-independent-external-comprehensive-review.html>; Marie Deschamps, External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces, External Review (External Review Authority, March 27, 2015). <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/sexual-misbehaviour/external-review-2015.html>; Simon Fothergill (Judge). *Between: Sherry Heyder, Amy Graham and Nadine Schultz-Nielsen (Plaintiffs) and The Attorney General (Defendant) And Between: Larry Beattie (Plaintiff) and The Attorney General (Defendant)*, No. T-2111-16/T-460-17 (Federal Court November 25, 2019); Donna Winslow and Jason Dunn, “Women in the Canadian Forces: Between Legal and Social Integration,” *Current Sociology* 50, no. 5 (2002): 641–667.
2. Paul Higate and Ailsa Cameron, “Reflexivity and Researching the Military,” *Armed Forces & Society* 32, no. 2 (2006): 219–233; Nancy Taber, “Understanding and Addressing Opposition to Transforming Military Cultures: Moving from Technical and Humanist to Critical Learning,” *Canadian Military Journal* 23, no. 3 (2023): 30–36.
3. Gillian Rose, “Situating Knowledge: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics,” *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (1997): 305–320.
4. Sara Goodkind, M. E. Kim, J. R. Zelnick, et al., “Critical Feminisms: Principles and Practices for Feminist Inquiry in Social Work,” *Affilia* 36, no. 4 (2021): 483.
5. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
6. Maya Eichler, *Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription, and War in Post-Soviet Russia* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012).
7. Maya Eichler, ed., *Gender and Private Security in Global Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
8. Maya Eichler, ed., “Gender and the Canadian Armed Forces,” in “Gender and the Canadian Armed Forces,” special issue, *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 41, no. 2 (2020). <https://journals.msvu.ca/index.php/atlantis/issue/view/364>; Maya Eichler, “How Gender Became a Defence Issue: A Feminist Perspective on Canadian Military and Defence Policy,” in *Turbulent Times, Transformational Possibilities? Gender and Politics Today and Tomorrow*, ed. Fiona MacDonald and Alexandra Dobrowsky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 141–58.

9. Maya Eichler, "Seeing Sex, Gender, and Intersectionality in Military, Veteran, and Family Health Research," in "Exploring Sex, Gender and Intersectionality in The Health and Well-Being of Military Members, Veterans and their Families," special issue, *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health* 7, no. s1 (September 2021): 1–2. https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh.7.s1_001; Maya Eichler, "Making Military and Veteran Women (in)Visible: The Continuity of Gendered Experiences in Military-to-Civilian Transition," *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health* 8, no. s1 (April 2022): 36–45. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2021-0077>.
10. Maya Eichler, Reina Green, and Tracy Moniz, eds., *Speaking up: New Voices on War and Peace in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Limited, 2022).
11. Tammy George, "Be All You Can Be or Longing to Be: Racialized Soldiers, The Canadian Military Experience and The Im/Possibility of Belonging to the Nation" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2016); Tammy George, "Race and Belonging," in *Strengthening the Canadian Armed Forces Through Diversity and Inclusion*, eds. Alistair Edgar, Rupinder Mangat, Bessma Momani (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 114–134.
12. Nancy Taber, "Learning How to Be a Woman in the Canadian Forces/Unlearning It Through Feminism: An Autoethnography of My Learning Journey," *Studies in Continuing Education* 27, no. 3 (2005): 289–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01580370500376630>.
13. Nancy Taber, "Ruling Relations, Warring, and Mothering: Writing the Social from The Everyday Life of a Military Mother" (unpublished PhD diss., University of South Australia, 2007).
14. Ibid; Nancy Taber, "Institutional Ethnography, Autoethnography, and Narrative: An Argument for Incorporating Multiple Methodologies," *Qualitative Research* 10, no.1 (2010): 5–25.
15. Nancy Taber, "Exploring the Interconnections between Adult Education, Militarism, and Gender: Implications for Our Field," *Studies in Continuing Education* 31, no. 2 (2009): 189–196; Nancy Taber, "Unexpected Directions: Adult Education, Feminist Antimilitarism, and Transforming Military Cultures," (presentation, International Adult and Continuing Education [IACE] Hall of Fame Inductee Symposium, University College Cork, 2022).
16. Nancy Taber, "Merging Historical Feminist Fiction-Based Research with The Craft of Fiction Writing: Engaging Readers in Complex Academic Topics Through Story," *Brock Education Journal* 33, no. 1 (2024):147–165.
17. Maya Eichler, Tammy George, and Nancy Taber, "How an Anti-Oppression Framework can Transform Military Cultures: Learning from the Canadian Context," (Workshop paper #5, Understanding of Military Culture to Support Organizational Change: Systems Approaches, Critical Analyses, and Innovative Research Methods [NATO HFM-RWS-363 workshop], Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden, April 20, 2023); Nancy Taber and Meaghan Shoemaker, "A Force to Imagine: A Feminist Rethinking of Universality of Service," *Journal of Military, Veteran, and Family Health* 10, no.1 (2024): 107–112.

18. Maya Eichler, Tammy George, and Nancy Taber, "Editorial: Transforming Military Cultures," *Canadian Military Journal* 23, no. 3 (2023): 3.
19. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–167.
20. Maya Eichler, Tammy George, and Nancy Taber, "The Arbour Report and Beyond," *Canadian Military Journal* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 11.
21. Kelly S. Thompson, *Girls Need Not Apply: Field Notes from the Forces* (McLelland & Stewart Canada, 2019); Kelly S. Thompson, "Changing Military Culture Through True Stories," (recorded public lecture, TMC symposium, February 17, 2023). <https://www.msvu.ca/research-at-the-mount/centres-and-institutes/transforming-military-cultures-network/publications/>.
22. Sharp Dopler, Nadine Schultz-Nielsen, and Christine Wood, "Learning from Lived Experience," (recorded opening panel, TMC symposium, November 17, 2023). <https://www.msvu.ca/research-at-the-mount/centres-and-institutes/transforming-military-cultures-network/publications/>.
23. Maya Eichler, Tammy George, Ash Grover, and Nancy Taber, "Dare to Disrupt the Status Quo: Envisioning Alternatives for Military Culture," *2023–24 TMC Symposium Report* (Transforming Military Cultures Network, forthcoming 2024).
24. Nancy Taber, "Expressive Writing as a Creative Means for Transforming Military Cultures: Insights and Recommendations," (working paper, Transforming Military Cultures Network, 2024); Ash Grover, "Writing to Create Culture Change," *TMC Blog*, April 12, 2023. <https://www.msvu.ca/research-at-the-mount/centres-and-institutes/transforming-military-cultures-network/blogs/>.
25. Eichler, George, and Taber, "Editorial: Transforming Military Cultures," 4.
26. Maya Eichler, Tammy George, and Nancy Taber, "Transforming (Military) Cultures: Getting Serious About Change," *TMC Blog*, September 26, 2023. <https://www.msvu.ca/research-at-the-mount/centres-and-institutes/transforming-military-cultures-network/blogs/>.
27. Portions of this section are adapted from Eichler, George, and Taber, "Learning from the Canadian Context."
28. Government of Canada, *Chief Professional Conduct and Culture*, last modified October 19, 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/organizational-structure/chief-professional-conduct-culture.html>.
29. Government of Canada, *CDS/DM Initiating Directive for Professional Conduct and Culture*, last modified April 30, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/dm-cds-directives/cds-dm-initiating-directive-professional-conduct-culture.html>.
30. Government of Canada, *Chief Professional Conduct and Culture*.

31. Government of Canada, *Defence Team Conduct and Culture Sessions*, last modified March 23, 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/conduct-and-culture/join-the-discussion-defence-team-conduct-and-culture-consultation.html>.
32. Government of Canada, *Defence Team Conduct and Culture Summary Report*, last modified November 25, 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/conduct-and-culture/join-the-discussion-defence-team-conduct-and-culture-consultation/defence-team-conduct-and-culture-consultation-summary-report.html>.
33. Ibid.
34. Government of Canada, *Canadian Armed Forces Ethos: Trusted to Serve*, 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/canadian-armed-forces-ethos-trusted-to-serve.html>.
35. Chief of Military Personnel (CMP). *DAOD 5023-0, Universality of Service*, 2006.
36. Chief of Military Personnel (CMP), *DAOD 5023-1, Minimum Operational Standards Related to Universality of Service*, 2022.
37. Although trials have begun to explore recruiting personnel with medical conditions. Ashley Burke, "Military ditching aptitude test for some applicants, will start accepting recruits with medical conditions," *CBC News*, Mar. 13, 2024. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/military-aptitude-tests-medical-standards-recruitment-trials-1.7141214>.
38. Nancy Taber, "'Trusted to Serve': Rethinking the CAF Ethos for Cultural Change," *Canadian Military Journal* 22, no. 3 (2022): 13–19.
39. Government of Canada, *Trusted to Serve*, p. 24.
40. Taber, "Trusted to Serve"; Taber and Shoemaker, "A Force to Imagine."
41. Government of Canada, *Defence Team Conduct and Culture Summary Report*.
42. Government of Canada, *Chief Professional Conduct and Culture*.
43. CPCC. *Together-Stronger Diversity of Service-Unity of Purpose Defence Team Culture Evolution Strategy, 2023-2024*, i.
44. Ibid, ii.
45. Ibid, ii.
46. Ibid, ii.
47. Eichler, George, and Taber, "Learning from the Canadian Context."
48. Nancy Taber, "The Canadian Armed Forces: Battling between Operation Honour and Operation Hop on Her," *Critical Military Studies* 6, no. 1 (2020): 19–40.
49. Government of Canada, *CDS/DM Initiating Directive*.

50. Catherine Baker, Victoria Basham, Sarah Bulmer, et al., "Encounters with the Military: Toward a Feminist Ethics of Critique?," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18, no. 1 (2016): 140–154; Victoria Basham and Sarah Bulmer, "Critical Military Studies as a Method: An Approach to Studying Gender and the Military," in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 59–71; Karen D. Davis, "Feminism and the Military: Misconceptions and Possibilities," *Canadian Military Journal* 23, no. 3 (2023): 69–73.
51. Ibid, 72.
52. Maya Eichler and Vanessa Brown, "Getting to the Root of the Problem: Understanding and Changing Canadian Military Culture," *Canadian Military Journal* 23, no. 3 (2023): 6–13.
53. Walter Callaghan, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Ritual Items as Inhibitors to Culture Change," *Canadian Military Journal* 23, no. 3 (2023): 65–68.
54. Eichler, George, and Taber, "Learning from the Canadian Context."
55. Eichler et al., "Dare to Disrupt the Status Quo."

Author Bios



Dr. Maya Eichler

Maya Eichler is a TMC Network co-director and the director of the Centre for Social Innovation and Community Engagement in Military Affairs at Mount Saint Vincent University. She holds the Canada Research Chair in Social Innovation and Community Engagement and is an associate professor of Political and Canadian Studies and Women's Studies. Her research focuses on gender and the armed forces, military sexual violence, military-to-civilian transitions, and community stories of war and peace.



Dr. Tammy George

Tammy George is a TMC Network co-director and an assistant professor in the Faculty of Health Science, School of Kinesiology at York University and is currently a psychoanalytic psychotherapy candidate at the Toronto Institute for Contemporary Psychoanalysis. Her current research lies at the intersection of critical military studies, racial violence and mental health and explores the reconfiguration of racial and national subjectivities in an era of neoliberalism.



Dr. Nancy Taber

Nancy Taber is a TMC Network co-director and a professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Brock University. Her research explores the ways in which learning, gender, and militarism intersect in daily life, popular culture, museums, militaries, and educational institutions. She has a particular focus on women's experiences in the Canadian Armed Forces as relates to organizational culture, official policies, and informal everyday practices, with respect to gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. She is a retired military officer who served as a Sea King helicopter air navigator. Along with publishing in traditional forms, she is conducting fiction-based research to disseminate her findings in the form of short stories and novels.

The authors would like to thank Lis Héroux Rhymes, Sophia Godsoe, and Kimberley Smith-Evans for their assistance in preparing this paper.