

# Sexual Misconduct and Cultural Change in the Canadian Armed Forces

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## Moving Forward the Care and Support of Women Veterans

We would express our appreciation to Captain (RCN) (Ret'd) Andrea Siew, former president of the Canadian Military Intelligence Association (a member-organization of NCVA) and a former co-chair of the Ministerial Policy Advisory Group, for her outstanding contribution to this critically important position paper which represents a high priority concern of NCVA's Legislative Program.

## Introduction

In 2021, NCVA provided a position paper and a high-level overview of the 30-year history of sexual misconduct in the CAF, including a summary of the findings of the previous investigations into the issue, the resulting recommendations, and the government response to address this unacceptable and abhorrent behaviour.

This report provides an update to the progress being made to achieve enduring culture change and to prevent and eradicate harassment and sexual misconduct in the CAF. This update will highlight progress being made to implement the recommendations of

the Honourable Louise Arbour's Independent External and Comprehensive Review (IECR), as well as activities to ensure the DND/CAF achieve meaningful culture transformation to prevent and eradicate sexual misconduct and harassment in the CAF.

We will also highlight the recent parliamentary Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACVA) study on the experience of women veterans, titled "Invisible No More. The Experiences of Canadian Women Veterans," and the gaps in the support and care provided by VAC for ill and injured women veterans. We will conclude with an assessment of the NCVA recommendations for change.

## Background

Since 2021, the CAF has been working to ensure meaningful and comprehensive cultural transformation in DND and CAF. This change started with the establishment of Chief Professional Conduct and Culture<sup>1</sup> and the appointment of Gen. Jennie Carignan to lead this transformation.

Key to transformation, in April 2021, and in response to allegations of significant sexual misconduct, the Government launched an IECR of current policies, procedures,

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1 <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/dm-cds-directives/cds-dm-initiating-directive-professional-conduct-culture.html>

programs, practices and culture within the DND/CAF, and engaged former Supreme Court justice Louise Arbour to undertake this review. The resulting comprehensive report, released on May 20, 2022,<sup>2</sup> detailed the causes of the continued presence of sexual harassment and misconduct in the CAF and provided 48 recommendations to prevent and/or eradicate sexual harassment and misconduct. Those areas ranged from the CAF's definitions of sexual misconduct and harassment to the Sexual Misconduct Response Centre (SMRC)'s mandate and activities, to issues around recruitment, military training and colleges, and included internal and external oversight mechanisms. The report's recommendations were thorough and, if fully implemented, would ensure long-lasting and enduring change to prevent and eradicate harassment and sexual misconduct.

On October 24, 2022, the Government appointed Madame Jocelyne Therrien as the external monitor to oversee the DND/CAF efforts to address sexual misconduct and harassment in the CAF and monitor the implementation of the 48 recommendations of the IECR.

On May 2, 2023, Madame Therrien provided her first progress report.<sup>3</sup> The report concluded that, while progress was being made, she stated there needs to be an overall strategic plan to ensure that resources are aligned to priorities.

## 2025 Progress

Over the last year there has been significant progress that responds to the NCVA concerns to achieve enduring culture change and to prevent and eradicate harassment and sexual misconduct in the CAF.

The sixth IECR report by Madame Therrien is expected to be released in November 2025. In January 2025, the review of the military colleges was published, outlining key recommendations to enhance the institutional response to sexual misconduct:

- (i) Military colleges should be mandated to publish a comprehensive analysis evaluating the impact and effectiveness of their policies and procedures related to sexual misconduct prevention and victim support.
- (ii) Military colleges should establish health, safety and well-being resource centres aimed at preventing harmful behaviour and supporting members' overall welfare.
- (iii) The Cadet Chain of Responsibility should be restructured to more effectively address issues related to culture and conduct within the colleges.

Between April and August 2024, 111 listening sessions were conducted, during which members shared their personal experiences to inform the review.

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2 <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/report-of-the-independent-external-comprehensive-review.html>

3 The May 2023 progress report is available here: <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/external-monitor-report-first-status-report-may2-2023.html#toc1>.

## IECR Update

The fifth status report by Madame Therrien was released on June 27, 2025. The following highlights the progress made in 2025 to implement the recommendations in the IECR.<sup>4</sup> It's worth noting that Madame Therrien states in the fifth report that while all IECR recommendations have been actioned, not all have reached full implementation, which may still take years to accomplish.

- (i) The independent review of the Royal Military Colleges, Recommendation 29 of the IECR, was announced on December 6, 2023. The review was conducted by five external experts and two defence team representatives. Released by the minister's office in March 2025, the report includes 48 recommendations addressing costs, governance, curricula and leadership attributes.
- (ii) On March 21, 2024, the minister of national defence announced amendments to the National Defence Act – Bill C-66 (the Military Justice System Modernization Act). The amendments proposed a suite of targeted changes to modernize the military justice system by addressing key recommendations made in the independent and external reviews conducted by former Supreme Court justices Louise Arbour and Morris J. Fish. The most significant

of these changes is the amendment to address Recommendation 5 from the IECR to definitively remove the CAF's jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute Criminal Code sexual offences committed in Canada. The proposed legislation provides exclusive jurisdiction to civilian authorities to investigate and prosecute such offences committed in Canada. A working group has been established in Ontario to develop a comprehensive inter-agency protocol that can serve as a model for implementation across other provinces and territories. It is important to note that this amendment is only for the investigation and prosecution of offences committed in Canada. This is a significant gap and the way forward for offences committed outside of Canada is unclear. The proposed legislative amendment is still under review by Parliament.

Under this amendment, victims no longer have a choice in how their case will be investigated or prosecuted. Also, there is an issue in the length of time it takes for investigation and prosecution in an already overcrowded civilian justice system. There have already been cases that were moved from the military justice system to the civilian system and then discontinued because of the delay

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<sup>4</sup> The fifth status report by the independent monitor Madame Jocelyne Therrien was released on June 27, 2025. The status report states that while all 48 of the Arbour recommendations have been actioned, not all have reached full implementation. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/external-monitor/external-monitor-report-fifth-status-report.html>

between charge and trial.

While this is a positive step forward in modernizing and enhancing the military justice system, there is more work to be done, especially in the area of resolving how the investigation and prosecution of sexual offences committed outside of Canada will be conducted as well as ensuring that the needs of victims of military sexual trauma come first.

- (iii) On May 8, 2024, Madame Therrien released her third status report of the progress made by the DND/CAF in implementing the IECR recommendations. In this report, she provides an update on the implementation of recommendations based on her regular discussions with former minister Bill Blair and DND/CAF officials – as well as review of documents, policies and processes. She notes there is a strong desire to bring about the change that will re-establish trust in the CAF as a professional, inclusive workplace – but she also notes there is still a lot of work to accomplish – and that the institution needs to move faster on implementation. The status report highlights several advancements, including:

- (a) Transformation of the complaints system, including grievances;
- (b) Appointment of the Canadian Military College Review Board;

- (c) The creation of a probationary period for new recruits by the CAF. Those who demonstrate inappropriate behaviours and attitudes are released;
- (d) Improvements to the enrolment and recruitment process; and
- (e) The creation of additional Captain (Navy)/Colonel positions in specified support and specialist occupations, which will provide more pathways to the General Officer and Flag Officer ranks for women.



- (iv) On June 27, 2024, the former minister of national defence provided an update on the implementation of recommendations to advance meaningful culture change in the DND/CAF including:
- (a) Several recommendations from the IECR highlighted issues with the previously inappropriate and inconsistent definitions of “sexual misconduct,” which contributed to a confusing and difficult

system for victims to navigate. The adoption of clearer distinctions between sexual assault, sexual harassment and personal relationships has led to a more coherent framework. This clarity enhances the ability of institutions to appropriately label, address and, where necessary, prosecute incidents of misconduct.

- (b) In response to Recommendation 11 of the IECR, CAF members now have the option to report harassment directly to a centralized authority, allowing them to bypass the traditional chain of command. This change is intended to make the reporting process more accessible and less intimidating. Madame Therrien has expressed confidence that this streamlined approach will encourage more individuals to come forward, ultimately leading to an increase in the reporting of inappropriate behaviour.
- (c) While we have seen progress, the advancement of women into senior ranks within the CAF has stalled. As a response, the CAF has announced they intend to implement promotion goals for women to achieve greater representation at all levels of CAF leadership. In addition, CAF policies related to recruitment, retention and promotion will be reviewed

through a GBA+ (Gender-Based Analysis Plus) lens to ensure they are inclusive, equitable and supportive of long-term career progression for women in the military.

### ACVA Study

In June 2024, the ACVA tabled their study on the experience of women veterans, titled “Invisible No More. The Experiences of Canadian Women Veterans,” in the House of Commons.

This landmark report, the largest study ever carried out by the committee, records for the first time the lived experiences of over 60 women veterans with service from today to over the past 40 years. Their testimony documents the horrific sexual abuse women CAF and RCMP members and veterans endured, the abuse of authority and the discrimination they suffered. Their testimony overwhelmingly highlighted how women veterans have encountered barriers and challenges to have their service-related injuries recognized by VAC for access to care, support and benefits. The lack of acknowledgment of the physical and mental injuries resulting from their service left many women feeling invisible and that they are not a veteran.

“Invisible No More. The Experiences of Canadian Women Veterans” was a watershed moment in recognizing the systemic challenges and harms faced by Canadian women veterans. But without action, its findings risk being shelved like many reports before it. The creation of the Women Veterans Council and new research initiatives are

welcome first steps – but they must be backed by transparency, meaningful engagement and concrete results.

The 42 recommendations in the report provide a starting point for the CAF, RCMP and VAC to finally be held accountable for the experiences and lifelong injuries that women veterans have endured. Now the Government must implement these recommendations and begin the process to ensure that all women who have served, are serving and who will serve Canada receive the care and support to meet their unique health needs as a result of injuries from their service.

This report is long overdue and must not, like the many other reports of this committee, sit on a shelf collecting dust. It is too important. Women who serve need to know that they matter, that abuse will not be tolerated, that they will receive care and support if injured, and that the process to receive that care and support shows compassion and respect.

In 2024, changes to the duty to report regulations were announced through a CANFORGEN, reflecting a shift toward a victim-centred, trauma-informed approach within the CAF. These changes aim to prioritize the needs and well-being of victims over institutional imperatives.

The repeal of the mandatory reporting requirement does not prevent the chain of command from addressing misconduct. Rather, it allows for greater discretion in how such matters are handled, ensuring that formal investigations are not automatically triggered

and that any response aligns with the wishes and needs of the victim. This approach is intended to build greater trust in the reporting process and support more compassionate outcomes.

Recommendations related to the SMSRC regarding access to free legal advice for victims have now been implemented. The SMSRC has established full-time legal resources to provide victims with accurate legal information, guidance and support, enhancing access to justice and reinforcing a victim-centred approach.

As an update for 2025, in relation to Recommendation 1 of the report, VAC engaged in extensive consultation in early 2025, including four round tables, a survey of 400 women veterans and a workshop at the 2025 Women Veterans Forum.

A Women Veterans Research Plan is under development and pending review by the Women Veterans Council; once finalized, it will guide research priorities and be published publicly. The NCVA will continue to monitor any updates throughout 2025-26, as well as for progress made to the ACVA report recommendations as a whole over the coming years.

The number of women veterans has increased since 1988 as a result of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal decision to begin the full integration of women into all roles (except submarines). Today, there are almost 75,000 women veterans, the largest growing group of veterans in Canada.<sup>5</sup> However, the ACVA report provides evidence to confirm that

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5 <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/4932-canadas-veterans-numbers#>

Canadian women veterans' service-related needs and care is inequitable in health and well-being outcomes to that experienced by other veterans and that they face unique issues and barriers when accessing VAC programs and services. Research shows that women veterans face different mental and physical health issues than men veterans, such as higher rates of mental health issues, chronic pain and gastrointestinal disorders.

Additionally, women veterans have unique health and wellness needs related to their sex and lifecycle, and they experience sex-specific service-related issues including ovarian failure/infertility, urinary incontinence, breast cancer, uterine prolapse, pregnancy complications and postpartum depression. Yet, VAC remains slow to mainstream and incorporate female sex-specific care and supports to ensure that women veterans have access to the care and support they need, and when they need it. The ACVA Report and its 42 recommendations will go a long way to ensure that VAC addresses these gaps in the care and support provided to women veterans. It is time for action.

On October 10, 2024, the federal government tabled its formal response to the ACVA report's recommendations, agreeing or agreeing in principle with 38 out of 42 recommendations, taking note of three and disagreeing with one (Recommendation 18). While the government's response appears supportive, without timelines in place to address these recommendations, the NCVA will continue to monitor the ongoing changes.

## Summary

The NCVA remains deeply concerned by the over 30 years of allegations of sexual misconduct in the CAF. The impact in terms of trusting leadership, morale and operational effectiveness is severe. While there has been significant progress, lasting change requires a commitment at all levels and there is still more to be done. NCVA has been monitoring the progress of the cultural change initiatives and participates as part of ongoing stakeholder engagement. We can confidently say we have seen significant progress.

The ACVA report underscores that women veterans' service-related needs or care is inequitable in health and well-being outcomes to that experienced by other veterans, and they face unique issues or barriers when accessing VAC programs and services. It is time that VAC be held accountable to ensure the availability and accessibility to programs and services that meet the unique needs of women veterans.

## Recommendations

Significant progress continues to be made to ensure transformational cultural change while at the same time responding to the NCVA recommendations made since 2021 to ensure immediate and enduring change in the CAF. Of the nine recommendations made since 2021, eight have been implemented and one is deemed not implemented.

The NCVA recommendations and their status include:

The NCVA 2021 Legislative Program made five recommendations to effect immediate and enduring change, and all but one have been implemented.

- (i) There must be immediate meaningful and comprehensive cultural transformation in DND and CAF to restore the trust in the leadership. The men and women who serve our country deserve to work in an environment that is free from all forms of harmful behaviour. (Implemented)
- (ii) There is a requirement for an external and independent reporting and investigation system outside the chain of command. This system must offer a reporting mechanism for incidents of sexual misconduct without reprisal, fear or isolation. (Implemented)
- (iii) There must be accountability for the actions of those who engage in this abhorrent and unacceptable behaviour. (Implemented)
- (iv) There must be the resources and support for all victims of sexual assault including CAF members and veterans. (Implemented)
- (v) Lastly, to effect and ensure meaningful change and oversight, the Government must establish a fully independent Office of the Inspector General of the DND and the CAF reporting to Parliament. (Not Fully Implemented)

The 2022 NCVA Legislative Program made two additional recommendations:

- (i) That the minister of national defence immediately appoint an independent external monitor, mandated to oversee the implementation of recommendations as required by Recommendation 48 in the IECR. (Implemented)

- (ii) That the minister of national defence not only inform Parliament of any recommendations that the Government does not intend to implement by the end of 2022 (Recommendation 47), but also provide the status, progress and timeline towards implementation of all the recommendations made by former justice Arbour in the IECR. (Implemented)

The 2023 NCVA Legislative Program made two additional recommendations:

- (i) That the minister of national defence extend the appointment of the external monitor to oversee the DND/CAF efforts to address sexual misconduct and harassment and monitor the implementation of the IECR for at least three years. (Implemented)
- (ii) That the minister of national defence take the necessary action to launch immediately the external review of the two military colleges. (Implemented)

In 2025, NCVA reports that, of the nine recommendations made since 2021, only one remains not implemented:

- (i) To effect and ensure meaningful change and oversight, the Government must establish a fully independent Office of the Inspector General of the DND and the CAF reporting to Parliament.