

FEMINISM AND THE MILITARY: MISCONCEPTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Introduction

This discussion draws from my personal military and defence experience to reflect on the influence of feminism. In doing so, I position this experience as an illustration of both the challenges and the possibilities that feminism offers for culture change in the military today. I identified as a feminist for over ten years of my 22 years of military service, and for well over 30 years combined as I held military staff and civilian research positions in defence. Although feminism has contributed to my conceptualization of culture-related challenges, I have cautiously negotiated my relationship with feminism. In this paper, I reflect on this experience to explore the intense scrutiny of feminism in the military, and the misconceptions that I encountered. Recognizing that critical feminist perspectives have been presented as an essential contributor to culture change, I argue that these misconceptions represent barriers to the opportunities that feminism offers for bringing new perspectives to change agendas. Finally, acknowledging the risks inherent to feminist identity in the military, the discussion closes with questions regarding what a strategy for the effective mobilization of feminism might consider.

My journey with feminism began in 1988 when I read *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives*,¹ a book first published by critical anti-militarist feminist Cynthia Enloe in 1983. At that point I had served for 10 years as a non-commissioned member of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Although a successful experience overall, like many other women and men, I had experienced some challenges. In the introduction to the second edition of her book, Enloe observed that several young women were quite angry when they read her book. I joined the ranks of those angry women when I read the book! As is often the case, when we are confronted with a new perspective that challenges our identities and understandings of the world, we look for flaws, ways to discount or undermine that new information or the person who conveys the information. Not only was Enloe questioning the merit of the participation of women in the military, she made reference to a

situation which I had experienced—the accusations, interrogations, and subsequent dishonourable release of several of my friends who were rooted out as lesbians while serving in Shelburne, Nova Scotia in the early 1980s.² The experience was still raw, and how dare this civilian woman propose to speak about that experience! And aha! She spelled Shelburne wrong³—the quickest reason I could find to dismiss the knowledge and assertions that she presented.

As I look back, I had underlined this passage from the book:

One reason why so many women feel strongly about women's entrance into and rights within the military is that many women are fighting hard to make their country's military a place where they are accepted on equal terms with men. Those women, exerting so much energy inside the military establishment to overcome barriers to training and promotion may find it insulting when a civilian feminist like me argues that a military is so fundamentally masculinized that no woman has a chance of transforming that military into a place where women and men can be equal...⁴

Enloe further noted,

...when a 'feminist-in-khaki' hears another woman arguing that the military is basically misogynist, she hears someone telling her that she can't accomplish what she's set out to do, that she's letting herself be duped if she persists in trying. The message reeks of condescension.⁵

Indeed, regardless of the status of women in the military, some Canadian military women have always believed they were treated equitably, and have expressed frustration with the feminists who push for change without really understanding military experience.⁶

Notwithstanding my initial reaction to feminism and its critical analysis of the military, I did have questions about my experience. I wanted to learn more, so I read more, including Zillah Eisenstein's book, titled *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*.⁷ I soon realized

that feminism has its own diversity and complexities. According to many, liberal or mainstream feminism is limited in its ability to facilitate meaningful progress toward equality. Eisenstein, for example, claims that contemporary liberal feminism has no theory for understanding the “very substantial struggles of women,”⁸ works within existing legislation and systems, and is a small step away from accepting, even reinforcing, the status quo. The potential for real change, claims Eisenstein, requires the development of theory which includes close attention to the experiences of “diverse groups of people,”⁹ and the contributions of all feminists in pushing equality as far as possible within the existing legislative and structural boundaries to uncover the structures that prevent equality.¹⁰ While acknowledging the need for change within existing structures, she also asserted that if “equality of opportunity were genuinely extended to women, it would require deep structural changes in society.”¹¹

Feminist theory and analysis not only significantly disrupted my worldview, but provided a framework for understanding some of my own challenges and experiences in the military. As things started to make sense on a personal level, I soon realized feminism’s potential for social change beyond my own experience. This mirrors the experience of Nancy Taber in an autoethnographic account of her military service. Feminist theory allowed her to not only make connections between personal experience and the broader social world, but to reveal phenomena that were previously not visible to her.¹² In my case, this was particularly relevant to my capability to critically examine and reveal gender-based patterns that could be applied to challenges with gender integration throughout the 1990s.¹³

I embraced feminism and integrated feminist analysis into my toolkit, but it was a tenuous relationship. It was clear to me that the only way to be a feminist in the military, or any Canadian public institution at the time, was to be a liberal feminist.

However, I experienced the contradictions that many of us struggle with as we work toward change—in my heart and mind, I recognized that equality demanded more fundamental change than I could seek as a member of the military—indeed, feminism represented a

potentially deeply disruptive proposition. I rationalized that I could live with liberal feminism, if it meant that I would still be making relevant contributions to future equality in the military. Eisenstein's thesis gave me hope and my mission was set. I had overcome the first obstacle to change; that is, opening my experience to the possibilities of a different way of understanding the relationship between my experience and the world I lived in, and how I might leverage that to contribute to positive change.

With guidance from my wise feminist mentor,¹⁴ I also confronted the real possibility that this new knowledge did not come without challenges. Somehow, I would have to navigate the tension between the anti-feminist agenda which was dominant in the CAF, and pushing the boundaries of the liberal feminist agenda toward equality. This challenge loomed at a time when feminism was the scapegoat for what was perceived as a significant threat to military operational effectiveness; that is, including women on the battlefield with men.¹⁵ Some in the military also suspected that this went beyond the right of women to serve, and that feminists were making a bid to challenge, even dominate, the (patriarchal) status quo by embracing the woman warrior as a powerful image of sisterhood and separatist philosophy.¹⁶ So I needed a strategy to protect myself from repercussion within a military culture that abhorred feminism, while still using the knowledge for positive change. Further, the capacity to critically reflect, which I had only recently gained, would be at risk in a world with no feminist connections, so I intentionally looked for opportunities to participate in communities outside the military where I would find feminist discussion and analysis.

Within the military, I was careful not to identify as a feminist. Yet at times, because of my perspective on personnel policies and activities, I was called out as a feminist, and in some cases a radical feminist. In one case, I was publicly admonished by a senior officer for conducting analysis from a feminist perspective. Sometimes these accusations undermined the credibility of my contributions and sometimes they silenced me. Although there were others like me who understood the power of feminist theory, they too were

negotiating their own feminist identities so that they would have a better chance to be listened to and to belong. As a result, those who wanted to further explore opportunities for change through the lens of feminism were marginalized, and were provided with virtually no space to have safe conversations with like-minded feminist colleagues or with nonfeminist women and men outside of these marginalized spaces. They were denied an opportunity to employ shared language, explore perspectives, and to determine how, in whole or in part, feminist foundations, principles, and objectives offered possibilities for change. These missed conversations were missed opportunities for learning, among feminists and nonfeminists, and for progress in the organization.

Since my introduction to feminism, feminist identity and language in the organization continue to be non-existent for many, denied by others, and consciously negotiated and camouflaged by some. More recently, others openly and proudly claim their feminist identity.¹⁷ In select circumstances, such as those engaged in knowledge work in the realms of policy, education, or research, there are opportunities for shared feminist identity and critical analysis in ways that contribute to important conversations around cultural transformation. In recent analysis of the systemic relationship between masculinity and militarism, Victoria Tait finds that some servicemembers are engaging in critical examination of the military's gendered culture and their positions within it. She cautiously suggests this dialogue may be contributing to "regendering" of the Canadian military.¹⁸ Notwithstanding, much work remains to be done to realize the possibilities offered by the frameworks and language of feminism, critical race theory, anti-colonial theory, and the anti-oppression framework put forward by the MINDS collaborative network for Transforming Military Cultures.¹⁹

I continue to struggle with what this means in the day-to-day experience of military members, what it tells about the changes that have taken place, and the continuous change that needs to happen. What I do know: Feminist theory and practice has a role in strengthening equality in the military, and in spite of the barriers to

its employ, it has had a profound impact on today's status of equality, and it will make a difference to the future. Feminist theory has also evolved considerably as its foundations continue to guide the development of insights and knowledge regarding gender, gender relations and experience in society, and our institutions. While it has been important to move away from essentialism and assumptions regarding the homogeneity of two gendered categories—woman and man—it is also fundamental to feminism to recognize woman as a category. Suggesting a genealogy of women, for example, Alison Stone claims that “although women do not form a unity; they are nevertheless assembled through their location within...history to a determinate social group,”²⁰ with unique experiences and outcomes from men. Feminist theory provides the key to meaningful and impactful gender mainstreaming, gender-based analysis plus, and intersectionality, all declared in recent years as high priorities for the Canadian military. The frameworks and language of feminism, along with critical race theory and anti-colonial theory, represent the possibilities for future conversations, belonging, and change. However, the possibilities depend upon safe spaces for conversations to discuss, debate, and inquire, using the language of feminism and anti-oppression in the institution, and to share feminist and anti-oppression identities with others. Yet, misconceptions and significant apprehension regarding the motivations and transformative power of feminism persist.

Creating safe spaces for difficult conversations is not new, but is a persistent challenge that will require expertise and innovative engaging approaches going forward. As they reflect on their research and related encounters with the military, critical feminist researchers Catherine Baker, Victoria Basham, Sarah Bulmer, Harriet Gray, and Alexandra Hyde reflect on the role of feminist critical military studies in interrogating and challenging un-gendered assumptions that are “deeply embedded in gendering ideas”²¹ and play a role in normalizing military concepts and spaces. While noting that bringing such challenging conversations to military members can be emotional, complex, and messy, they also suggest the potential for these engagements to open up more and wider conversations.²² In

developing an interactive performance to facilitate a difficult conversation on war and the military, critical military scholar, Maya Eichler, and military veteran and performance artist, Jessica Lynn Wiebe, began with a critical insight: “...engaging in dialogue comes with the risk of facing judgement, causing friction, and ending relationships.”²³ Maya and Jessica engaged performance art to stage a two-way dialogue that developed into a broader conversation with their audience. This collaborative artwork helped them to ask questions and engage each other in ways that they believe would otherwise not have been possible,²⁴ but also meant making themselves vulnerable “...by sharing personal information and accepting the uncertainty of how the other would respond.”²⁵ As we think about innovative approaches to create safe spaces for conversation, our virtual world will also play a key role. In their film, *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age*, documentary feminist filmmakers Guylaine Maroist and Lea Clermone-Dion challenge the rise of sexism and anti-feminist violence in Canada, noting that it is often promulgated through personal attacks on social media.²⁶ Just as feminists in the military have camouflaged their perspectives to secure their safety and protect careers, female gamers create male avatars to protect themselves from such personal attacks.²⁷ What can be done to help prevent the Canadian military from once again being showcased on the wrong side of Canada’s social history? Drawing from themes identified in Maroist and Clermone-Dion’s film, I close with the following suggestions, adapted for consideration within Canadian military context:

- Protect and provide opportunity for those who want to talk about feminism and what it might mean to them
- Seek opportunities to navigate the language and meanings of feminism and related concepts. The tools to do this are currently only available to a limited and privileged few.
- Seek to understand the various ways that sex and gender identities and representations are attacked and undermined, for different reasons and in different contexts, for example:

- expressions of lack of confidence in abilities of women and feminized men in masculine, physical dominated spaces;
- sexual harassment, sexual assault;
- limits to opportunity for collective sharing of experience through shaping and limiting, for example, language and identity;
- subtle, yet insidious undermining of high performing women and feminized men, including those in leadership roles; and,
- resistance to the often difficult and challenging language and concepts.

In summary, this discussion suggests that there has been resistance to feminism in the military, often based on misconceptions and limited knowledge regarding the diversity of feminism and the possibilities that it offers for realizing equality among women and men. The relevance and power of feminism stems from its insistence that, in spite of the diverse identities and experiences among women and men, women have historically, and today continue, to experience fundamental physical and socially constructed conditions that are unique from men. While social change in the military today is being influenced by feminist theories and concepts, such as gender mainstreaming, gender-based analysis, and intersectionality, limited understanding of the feminist foundations of these important initiatives presents risk for insufficient engagement with these strategies. Keeping in mind the many lost opportunities for critical inquiry and the relevance of feminist perspectives to the objectives of culture change in the past, this conversation highlights the importance of seeking and creating safe spaces and opportunities to focus on the possibilities offered by feminism, as well as critical race and anti-colonial theory, to future equality among the women and men who serve, and those who aspire to serve.

Endnotes

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² See Karen D. Davis, "From Ocean Ops to Combat Ops: A short history of women and leadership in the Canadian Forces," in *Women and Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Perspectives & Experience*, ed. Karen D. Davis (Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007).

³ Appeared as "Shelbourne" in Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?*, xxi.

⁴ Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You*, xvii.

⁵ Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You*, xvii.

⁶ Karen D. Davis, *Negotiating Gender in the Canadian Forces 1970-1999*, Unpublished PhD dissertation (Kingston, ON: Royal Military College of Canada, 2013).

⁷ Zillah R. Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*. (Northeastern University Press, 1986).

⁸ Nancy Harstock, "Feminism, Power and Change: A Theoretical Analysis," in *Women Organizing*, eds. Bernice Cummings and Victoria Schuck (Scarecrow Press: 1978): 11-12, as cited by Eisenstein, *The Radical Future*, 4.

⁹ Harstock, "Feminism, Power and Change," 11-12, as cited by Eisenstein, *The Radical Future*, 4-5.

¹⁰ Eisenstein, *The Radical Future*, 224.

¹¹ Roberta Hamilton, *Gendering the Vertical Mosaic: Feminist Perspectives on Canadian Society* (Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005, 2nd edition), 47.

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. DOI: 10.1080/01580370500376630

¹³ See for example, Karen D. Davis, "Understanding Women's Exit from the Canadian Forces: Implications for Integration," in *Wives & Warriors: Women and the Military in the United States and Canada*, eds. Laurie Weinstein and Christie C. White (Bergin & Garvey, 1997).

¹⁴ Dr. Linda Christiansen-Ruffman, Professor Saint Mary's University, Halifax NS.

¹⁵ Karen D. Davis, *Negotiating Gender in the Canadian Forces*.

¹⁶ Radical feminism as described by Francine D'Amico, "Feminist Perspectives on Women Warriors," in *The Women & War Reader*, eds. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), cited within a broader analysis of feminisms in Karen D. Davis, *Negotiating Gender in the Canadian Forces*.

¹⁷ Vanessa Brown, "Feminism is a Bad Word': Towards a Heutagogic Approach to Learning about Gender in Professional Military Education," *Archipelago* (2018). <https://aodnetwork.ca/feminism-is-a-bad-word-towards-a-heutagogic-approach-to-learning-about-gender-in-professional-military-education/>.

¹⁸ Victoria Tait, "Regendering the Canadian Armed Forces," *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 41, no. 2 (2020): 9-25.

¹⁹ Maya Eichler, Tammy George and Nancy Taber, *Transforming Military Cultures* DND MINDS Collaborative Network, 2022-2025. <https://www.msvu.ca/research-at-the-mount/centres-and-institutes/transforming-military-cultures-network/>.

²⁰ Alison Stone, "On the Genealogy of Women: A Defence of Anti-essentialism," in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* 2nd Edition, eds. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Mumford (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

²¹ Catherine Baker, Victoria Basham, Sara Bulmer, Harriet Gray, and Alexandra Hyde, "Encounters with the Military: Toward a Feminist Ethics of Critique?" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18, no. 1 (2016): 142. DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2015.1106102.

²² Baker, Basham, Bulmer, Gray, and Hyde, "Encounters with the Military," 140-154.

²³ Maya Eichler and Jessica Lynn Wiebe, "The Art of Discomfort: Engaging in Dialogue on War," *Critical Military Studies* 5, no. 1 (2019): 83.

²⁴ Eichler and Wiebe, "The Art of Discomfort," 88.

²⁵ Eichler and Wiebe, "The Art of Discomfort," 83-84.

²⁶ Guylaine Maroist and Lea Clermone-Dion, *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age* (La Ruelle Films, 2022).

²⁷ Guylaine Maroist and Laurence Gratton (school teacher featured in film *Backlash*), interview with Matt Galloway, *CBC The Current*, February 15th, 2023 (aired January 20th, 2023). <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/friday-january-20-2022-full-transcript-1.6721602>.

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