

SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES: CHALLENGING OR REINFORCING PATRIARCHY?

LEIGH SPANNER



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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

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Introduction

The strength and resilience of military families are recognized by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) as contributing to the operational readiness and effectiveness of the forces. This acknowledgment was formalized in the Military Family Covenant,¹ which was issued in 2008. It reflects an institutional shift from previous decades. Previously, the support provided by military families, and of wives, was expected based on love and devotion to their husband and a sense of patriotic duty and the ideal military family was a nuclear one.² Military families are now recognized as “partners”³ in operational endeavors, and consequently the CAF commits to supporting modern families with a variety of programs and resources.

This paper draws on the well-established body of feminist International Relations, which shows that militaries are deeply patriarchal institutions that sustain unequal relationships of power by privileging masculinity and exploiting women and feminized practices of labour.⁴ To be sure, militaries have long depended on civilian women who prioritize their husband’s military service, arrange their practices and identities accordingly, and are socialized to view doing so as being in their best interest.⁵ Heteropatriarchal schemas of the family are deeply tied to a gendered division of labour, which “enables masculinized subjects to participate in military life because a feminized subject remains behind to sustain the home.”⁶ This work is feminized by its taken-for-granted, invisible and unpaid status and sustains male dominance in militaries and in families. However, these gendered dynamics are not naturally occurring. Rather, women’s commitment to their spouse and contributing labour for militaries are achieved by social, cultural, and political reproductions, such as institutional policies and programs. This paper considers whether changing demographics of Canadian military families as well as institutional attempts to respond to the changes in military families might be undoing the privileging of patriarchy that characterizes military culture.

Since the implementation of the Canadian Forces Family Covenant

by the CAF, which acknowledges the military family's contribution to operational effectiveness and consequently commits to supporting them in return, the Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services (CFMWS) has attempted to modernize its services and programs to better respond to the changing needs of military families. This commitment is outlined in military policy, Defence Administrative Order and Directive on Families 5044-1, noting the CAF's commitment to supporting military families, especially considering "the ever-changing structure, composition and function of Canadian families."⁷ Thus, a significant component of this change is the institutional acknowledgement that Canadian military families look different than they once did. That is, military families are less likely to comprise of a male CAF member is supported by a female civilian spouse who is primarily devoted to the home.⁸ One might then expect the CAF to be less "married" to patriarchal configurations of the family, however, as will be seen, this paper suggests otherwise.

This paper considers whether the CAF's current efforts to support military families represent a departure from previous gender orders, which privileged a patriarchal composition of the family. I ask, do the CAF's updated initiatives that support military families represent a change in culture, to one that promotes more equitable gender relations in families and that services a variety of family forms? Asking this question is important in considering military families that do not fit the mold of the nuclear family, such as single mothers, dual service couples, and LGBTQ2S+ families, and is an important consideration in light of recruitment and retention efforts by the CAF.

This paper employs a critical feminist perspective to consider the policies and programs related to Military Family Services (MFS), which was established by the Department of National Defence (DND) in 1991 and offers support to military families to enhance their health and social wellbeing. MFS programs and policies are the focus of this research because it provides the bulk of support to military families; it was created in response to feminist activism in the CAF by military wives⁹ and it continues to be amended to better serve the changing needs of military families. Moreover, by interrogating MFS programs

and policies, which developed in response to women's activism, this paper is responding to feminist efforts to initiate culture change. Specifically, I undertake a feminist policy and content analysis of the MFS website. The goals of feminist policy and content analysis are to make women's lives and gendered assumptions visible. Accordingly, I paid particular attention to the CAF's efforts to mediate gender relationships between the state, market, and family. This approach is critical because it understands that policies can structure and reinforce power dynamics by maintaining privilege and silencing the disempowered.

In this paper, I argue that while institutional supports for military families and spouses appear progressive, in that they acknowledge and respond to family needs as well as recognize a variety of family configurations, these supports and policies rely on antiquated gendered and neoliberal logics to secure the labour and loyalty of spouses and families to the CAF. Neoliberal policies are characterized by privatization, which involves the transfer of social services and goods from the state to private markets, households and communities. Familialization is an outcome of privatization, and increases the individual's reliance on families and households, which increases women's unpaid labour.¹⁰ The paper begins with an analysis of Military Family Resource Centers (MFRC) documents pertaining to childcare. MFS delivers its programs locally through Military Family Resource Centres (MFRCs). MFRCs are located on thirty-two military bases across Canada and provide frontline services to military families ranging from childcare, deployment information and training, counselling, and education. The paper then turns to a discussion on the recent and increasing attention to changing family dynamics, including care for aging parents and for the families of CAF members transitioning to civilian life on release from service.

Childcare and MFRCs

To safeguard the loyalty of military recruits, the CAF is paying increasing attention to family wellbeing. As militaries are committed first and foremost to their missions, institutional attention to family

wellbeing is done with a view to guarantee and improve operational effectiveness, and not necessarily to support families in their own right. The Forces require families to relocate to new postings, endure periods of separation during deployment and training, and manage the risks associated with having a loved one in service. In particular, the military spouse's satisfaction with military life is recognized as being essential to operational effectiveness.¹¹ Thus, the CAF has a special interest in supporting military spouses to assure their continued labour and loyalty. The CAF's family-focused initiatives respond to the burden of care on civilian spouses, especially women. More than half of Regular Force (Reg F) members are in a relationship, 84% of spouses are women,¹² and almost half (47%) of all Reg F personnel have children.¹³ Consequently a significant component of the services provided by MFS, through MFRCs, is around childcare and supports predominantly women civilian spouses.

The childcare services provided by MFRCs emphasize their emergency childcare services.¹⁴ While such an initiative might be intended to be flexible and to respond to a variety of family arrangements and needs, the emergency emphasis reinforces a downloading of childcare responsibility onto civilian spouses. The Emergency Childcare Services brochure is the first item under "Childcare" on the MFS webpage.¹⁵ Within this brochure, the first "service" outlined is the Family Care Plan (FCP), which is effectively a plan that has CAF members "identify primary and secondary caregivers who should be contacted in the event of an emergency military tasking, your FCP supports your family in your absence."¹⁶ The FCP represents neoliberalism's paradox of autonomy and downloads the responsibility for caregiving to individuals and families, which has gendered implications and outcomes.¹⁷ That is, the FCP is a way to formalize child caregiving onto civilian spouses and/or the private market, in order to prioritize the (usually) male service person's career.

The second "support" outlined in the brochure is the MFRC Emergency Child Plan. The Emergency Child Plan encourages

members and their families to develop a strategy for emergency childcare, where reliance on the MFRC should be a last resort only: “Be proactive!...Deal with things before an immediate need arises.”¹⁸ The most substantive service outlined in this brochure is the Military Family Service Program Emergency Child Care, which provides “up to 96 hours of subsidized childcare per emergency, to help you address your short-term emergency childcare needs.”¹⁹ The emphasis on short-term and emergency childcare support by the CAF reinforces the idea that, during periods of normalcy, the military family does not rely on the institution for support. Instead, under normal circumstances, military families are “proactive” and arrange personal solutions to childcare challenges, such as relying on informal networks. There is social pressure to create informal networks of support so as not to rely on the emergency services provided by the MFRC. This means in practice that it is mostly women who are responsible for finding alternate care giving arrangements when the service person needs to be away for service reasons, and who are tasked with dealing with any childcare crisis in the face of service-related separations and absences.

Crucially, the short-term emergency “supports” that are outlined in the brochure are for the express purpose of facilitating “operational readiness.”²⁰ Despite the military’s contemporary concern for the wellbeing of the family, Horn argues, “below the surface of the military’s family programs is the constant awareness that the military is designed to fight wars, not provide social welfare programs.”²¹

The assumption that the civilian spouse is responsible for caregiving of children is the logic behind a majority of the supports offered by the CAF, such as the foundational Family Care Assistance—a benefit that a member can access if the caregiving plan outlined in the FCP cannot be met. Family Care Assistance provides financial reimbursement for single-parent CAF members and dual-service couples under exceptional circumstances, specifically “increases in the normal costs for childcare or attendant care when service requires you to be absent from home for 24 hours or longer.”²² This benefit is only available to “members who do not have a spouse or

common-law partner, or who have a spouse or common-law partner who is also a CAF member and who is away from their place of duty for service reasons.”²³ On the surface, this benefit appears progressive in that it acknowledges and accommodates non-heteronormative families and is a provision of social support by the military. Both the single member and dual-service couple challenge the heteronormative requirement that military families have a feminized spouse devoted to childcare and the domestic sphere. However, giving financial compensation for childcare only to families of single service members or dual-service couples reinforces the assumption that military families normally include a civilian spouse who is primarily responsible for childcare. When there is a civilian spouse as a part of the family, there is no additional compensation to offset caregiving costs, because the assumption is that this will be taken care of in the private/unpaid sphere. In fact, there are no respite program for military spouses during operational absences²⁴ and an overall inequality between service spouse and civilian spouse on the institutional support provided. The “exceptional circumstance” that Family Care Assistance responds to is the non-nuclear family. It is only when the caregiving void cannot be performed by the civilian spouse, because she does not exist, that the state intervenes with support.

What’s more, the Family Care Assistance is also an “emergency” form of support. When considered alongside the expectation outlined in the FCP, the Family Care Assistance program’s emergency principle suggests that the member will resume being self-sufficient once the “emergency” has passed. The military member will devise personal solutions to their non-normative family, and corresponding caregiving void, through personal solutions, likely by paying for childcare. In this instance neoliberal philosophies of self-sufficiency obscure how patriarchal families continue to be idealized in the military community and reinforced through CAF policies and programming.

In 2020, an additional emergency-based childcare program was implemented by MFS in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such an initiative suggests ongoing attention to the shifting and

increasing challenges faced by families throughout the pandemic, such as lockdowns and isolations. For military families, these strains are likely exacerbated by operational separations and postings away from families. This program is intended for exceptional periods of crisis, and is thus available “after all other avenues of support provided by the CAF and Director General Compensation and Benefits (DGCB) have been explored and/or enacted and insufficient to meet military family’s emergency needs.”²⁵ While MFS is responding to modern challenges due to the pandemic, in emphasizing the emergency nature of the benefit, and in offering this benefit based on the service-person’s employment status, while not considering that of the civilian spouse, revives assumptions of the “wife” at home. While studies show how the pandemic had a particular impact on women, there is no institutional acknowledgement of this fact by the CAF, despite attempts to be culturally aware of “ever changing structure and composition and function of military families.”²⁶

Notwithstanding the emphasis on emergency support, MFRCs provide some form(s) of regular childcare services, such as full-time daycare, before- and after-school care, and, most popular among military families, casual care. Childcare services are highly sought after by military families because MFRCs understand and are responsive to the unique schedules and needs of military families. Certainly, MFRC childcare goes a long way to support military families, offsetting the challenges associated with separation and reducing the labour burdens that fall on military spouses.

Although childcare at MFRCs is partially subsidized, there are limited spots and long waiting lists. Additionally, MFRC programs are criticized for being directed at very young children, at the expense of school-aged children or teens. And elsewhere, MFRC programing has been critiqued for focusing on deployment support at the expense of other service-related absences. Indeed, often military families are unable to avail themselves of the services that are specifically designed for deployment, even if the service member is separated from the family for other service-related reasons, such as exercise or

from the family for other service-related reasons, such as exercise or on course.²⁷

While the programs and services provided by MFRCs are a great source of support for many military families, they struggle with capacity and to adequately respond to the needs of modern military families.²⁸ For example, the only military daycare center in Halifax will close in March 2023, because of staffing issues.²⁹ Scarce resources and reduced public responsibility require that military families reduce their reliance on MFRCs as the primary source of regular childcare. For example, the Petawawa MFRC (PMFRC) hosted a Childcare Fair in February 2019, a networking event between parents and childcare providers in the Renfrew County area, in response to the number of families having difficulty finding suitable childcare options. The Childcare Fair “encouraged parents to be open to look at various ways childcare challenges can be resolved,”³⁰ effectively devolving responsibility for military childcare away from MFRCs onto individual families. This form of institutional support, which responds to modern challenges of military families, calls for greater self-sufficiency among families by encouraging market-based solutions to challenges that are result of military requirements such as relocation and separation. At the same time, these neoliberal schemes require a militarization of privatized childcare, where the market is responding to and capitalizing on the vacuum of CAF subsidized childcare in service to the military.

Alongside neoliberal influences on MFRC programing and culture, many of the programs and services provided by MFRCs are produced by and reproduce the association of the female civilian spouse with primary caregiving of children. For example, a “Me and My Dad” special event was offered by the Gagetown MFRC on Saturday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. in April 2017. The description of the event read, “Dads enjoy an outing with the kids (mom gets a break!).”³¹ Programs for fathers, which are scheduled on the weekends, reinforce the gendered labour dynamics that “dad” engages primarily in paid work and parents as a special occasion. Indeed, “giving mom a break” entrenches the assumptions further.

Ideas about gender, parenting, and employment inform the culture of MFRCs, and consequently their service delivery, despite efforts to respond to a variety of family configurations. Certainly, the service delivery at MFRCs is directed at the largest demographic, which is civilian women. However, upholding and reinforcing gendered ideas about division of labour within families is an implicit critique of families that do not fit this mold, such as the single male parent and Queer families. This raises questions about gender equality within the CAF. As MFRCs emphasize support to women who are the primary caregivers of young children, the military logic of protection, which contends that men, through their military service, protect the home front where women and children are located, is upheld and reinforced. Indeed, research on and programs for civilian men spouses is an area that represents significant opportunities moving forward.³²

Caregiving for the Modern Military Family: Aging Parents and Veterans

While a significant focus of the supports offered by the CAF is directed towards childcare, MFS is increasingly recognizing the variety of structures and caregiving dynamics within military families. The CAF has begun to recognize and support families of veterans, members who are taking care of aging parents, and parents of CAF members. Consequently, the CAF is embracing a wider definition of “family,” understanding the array of caregiving labour and relationships that characterize “families,” and in so doing might be disrupting the privileging of patriarchal/heteronormative family forms and the reliance on women’s unpaid labour.

The recent and growing political attention to veteran families in Canada parallels the attention to veterans’ transition from military to civilian life. The past decade has seen an emergence of reports and initiatives on the importance of integrating families and spouses in the transition process and of Veterans Affairs Canada’s (VAC) responsibility to support veteran families.³³ In 2015, VAC acknowledged that informal caregivers make a vital contribution to the health and

well-being of ill and injured Veterans through the implementation of the Family Caregiver Relief Benefit (FCRB). Through the grant, VAC recognized the informal care provided by caregivers such as “making appointments, coordinating household tasks and providing basic assistance with daily living.”³⁴ This initiative was a step forward in acknowledging and offsetting the sacrifices born by caregivers.

The CAF appears to be responding in kind by devoting attention and resources to the wellbeing of service members through their military to veteran transition, as well as the wellbeing of their families. In 2018,³⁵ MFRCs expanded their supports to the family members of medically releasing members, through the Veteran Family Program. The Veteran Family Program includes services like group sessions on transition topics, mental health first aid courses, specialized referral services, and continued access to traditional MFRC programming.³⁶ The Veteran Family Program is funded through Veterans Affairs Canada in partnership with the CFMWS.³⁷ However, many of these services are self-help in nature and formalize the downloading of responsibility back onto families rather than provide support in a more concrete or substantive sense. For example, a service listed is entitled “Care for the Caregiver,” and provides caregivers of veterans and medically releasing military members living with an Operational Stress Injury (OSI) “education as well as self-care tools to support the caregiver role.”³⁸ These “supports” celebrate neoliberal models of citizenship, whereby people become less reliant on social services.³⁹ Instead, more substantive support could involve institutional resources being invested into offsetting the burden on the caregivers of OSIs, such as providing reprieve, rather than investing in caregivers teaching themselves how to better handle said burden. The programs formalize the dependence on women’s unpaid labour in military and veteran families.

Expanding notions of “the family” also include MFS’ acknowledgment of this generation’s increasing responsibility for aging parents. “Elder Care” offers resources for military families taking care of elderly parents, which at present are predominantly information-based tools

and resources.⁴⁰ Support for these family configurations (whether sharing a household or not) may be especially helpful to women CAF members, who have disproportionate caregiving responsibilities relative to their male counterparts.⁴¹ These resources may be particularly important for CAF members who are living in intergenerational households, especially newcomer and Indigenous families.⁴² However, at present, the supports for military families taking care of elderly parents do not include a financial element to deal with, for example, deployment related or emergency issues and care, which is made more difficult for military families who are posted away from families of origin. In a 2015 study, 25% of CAF members who provide elder care reported that their caregiving responsibilities could result in them requesting an early release from the CAF, and relocations especially were seen as an area where the level of support they currently receive could be improved.⁴³ Therefore, recognizing various forms of family caregiving arrangements might result in leveling the playing field for service women, and thus rewriting gender relations of power in the military.

MFS is also providing support to parents of CAF members, expanding notions of the family to include “extended family members.” Indeed, there is an official acknowledgment that supporting CAF members in their service and post-service life is a community endeavor that extends beyond the nuclear family:

It is important for parents, grandparents, and extended family of military members to support one another. It doesn't matter whether a member is deployed, posted out of province, out of the country, or around the corner, every circumstance is different and requires this special population to band together.⁴⁴

These “supports” are also information and self-help based. Importantly, MFS appears to be struggling with adapting more robust supports to the realities of elder parents of CAF members, such as those who might not live near MFRCs. Moreover, MFRCs do not consistently offer supports to elder parents of CAF members, and

certain avenues of support are not available to them, such as health promotion programs.⁴⁵

While the attention to varied family forms is increasingly being acknowledged and might be disrupting the privileging of a patriarchal family formations in the military community, much of the actual support programs directed at these subpopulations and/or non-traditional families lack substance. Indeed, the more substantial programs, such as those providing reimbursement, are still only eligible to those in nuclear families; that is, a spouse and dependent children living under the same roof. In fact, the definition of “family member” varies among different programs of support/resources, making it confusing to navigate for certain groups of people, if not promoting a degree of vulnerability in military life. In a revision of the Military Family Plan, Anne Chartier explains that an inconsistent definition of “family member” risks making vulnerable certain types of families and family members. She notes:

Parents of single CAF members, single parent CAF members, children with special needs or dual service couples have been refused the services they need, either because they are not eligible, or because the program is not geared toward the segment of the population to which they belong. Furthermore, dislocated families (legal status in transition, custody problems) also have difficulty accessing services or benefits because of the inconsistent definition of “family”.⁴⁶

Certainly, a modern military family definition is called upon to respond to the needs of all military families and in destabilizing the idealization of a patriarchal family formation. A modern definition of the family would expand notions of kinship beyond marriage, and beyond sharing a household. Doing so would likely have an impact on recruitment and retention diversity and equity goals.

Conclusion

MFS provides a suite of services, supports, and resources to Canadian military families, with a view to reduce the burdens of military life. In recent years there has been increasing attention to improve the quality of services offered to families, especially considering the ever-changing dynamics, and consequently needs, of modern military families. In responding to these shifts, MFS has offered a host of childcare services, and is increasingly expanding who they consider to be family members and thus “clients.” This paper evaluated some recent initiatives by MFS to consider whether they represent a change in military culture — one that is less reliant on traditional gender roles in the family, such as the reliance on the unpaid labour of military spouses. This paper showed that in some ways the privileging of patriarchal formations of the family, and the reliance on the unpaid labour of women, appears to be eroding. For example, the CAF has begun to expand their definition of family to include various relations and caregiving dynamics, such as CAF members who are caring for their aging parents. Moreover, the CAF officially, and in policy, now recognizes the labour and sacrifice of military families and acknowledges these contributions as enabling operational readiness and effectiveness is a shift in institutional culture, in contrast to previous eras which took these contributions for granted or acknowledged them informally.

Despite some cultural changes, this paper revealed that subtle, and not-so-subtle privileging of patriarchy remains through the institutional relationship with military families. Inequitable gender relations persist due to programming that idealizes a patriarchal family that is comprised of a masculinized service member and a feminized civilian spouse, as well as an institutional commitment to the heteropatriarchal definition of the family, which informs who can access MFS services. Indeed, much of the financial support provided to military families remains tied to the operational status of the CAF member. Consequently, many support services risk alienating and/or disadvantaging military families that do not take a traditional shape,

such as single parents, and members of LGBTQ+ communities. This undoubtedly influences recruitment and retention of underrepresented groups in the CAF, such as women.

Considering the institutional concern with recruitment and retention, and corresponding commitments to equity and diversity, the CAF might consider how a new generation of service members may be defined less by traditional gender norms, have a variety of family and kinship relationships, and seek employers that promote a more robust work-life balance. Continuing to modernize MFS services in such a way that responds to the new generation of would-be service members would benefit from broader recognition of the “family” and a better understanding of how work and home life is negotiated. While the CAF has begun to respond to the cultural changes that characterize military family life, and has in response embraced related initiatives, this paper suggests that there remain opportunities for change that more meaningfully challenge patriarchy in Canada’s military. Considering how patriarchy in military family life is perpetuated and resisted is an important component of understanding broader military culture and its variations.

Endnotes

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Author Bio

Leigh Spanner

Dr. Leigh Spanner is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Social Innovation and Community Engagement in Military Affairs at Mount Saint Vincent University. Her research involves feminist interrogations of state militaries, with a particular focus on military families. Her work is published in *Critical Military Studies*, *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, and *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*.