

May 23, 2019

# Women Veterans' Forum Summary

VETERANS AFFAIRS CANADA

# A. Executive Summary

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On May 23, 2019 in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, the Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence, hosted the first Canadian forum for women Veterans. The Minister of Veterans Affairs was joined by 60 participants representing stakeholder organizations, members of the Minister's advisory groups, subject matter experts and government officials. Of these 60 participants, 28 were women Veterans.

Throughout the summer of 2018, Veterans Affairs Canada hosted regional stakeholder summits across the country which culminated in a national stakeholder summit in October 2018. During these summits, stakeholders provided valuable insight, advice and recommendations on areas on which Veterans Affairs Canada needs to focus more attention. Support for women Veterans was one of those key areas.

The Women Veterans' Forum was a recognition of the need to strengthen partnerships on the topic of women Veterans, as well as the need to engage in constructive dialogue. Throughout the day, there were opportunities for stakeholders to come together through breakout sessions to identify directions for program and policy development, future research and areas of collaboration regarding women Veterans.

The central themes raised at the Women Veterans' Forum related most often to the following areas:

- Programs and Services
- Research
- Collaboration
- Communication and Outreach
- Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+)

This historic event was the first step in an ongoing commitment to the well-being of Canada's women Veterans. There is much work to be done and this forum has begun to build momentum to move this work forward.

# B. Introduction

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## Opening Remarks

The moderator for the day, Associate Deputy Minister Lisa Campbell, welcomed participants to the forum.

Some brief notes on terminology were highlighted. The title “Women Veterans” was used during the forum rather than female Veterans to allow for discussions about gender and sociocultural differences and identities in addition to sex differences (i.e., a person’s biological and physiological characteristics). That said, the term “Female Veterans” was also used in this forum as some of the research conducted has used this construct. Veterans Affairs Canada also recognizes that not all individuals identify with a binary concept of sex or gender and that dialogue on gender identity continues to be a priority in Canada and around the world. Our understanding of sex and gender and how and when to use these designations continues to grow and shift.

As well, Veterans Affairs Canada recognizes that the experiences of women Veterans are impacted by intersecting parts of their identity and lived realities. This includes but is not limited to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age and mental or physical disability. Veterans Affairs Canada is committed to ensuring policy and program development is intersectional and inclusive.

Deputy Minister General (retired) Walter Natynczyk delivered welcoming remarks, noting the historic nature of the forum and importance of this work. The Deputy Minister recognized the work of the stakeholders in the room in advancing the well-

being of women Veterans and their families, including both Canadian Armed Forces Veterans and released members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

## Setting the Stage

Three senior Veterans Affairs Canada officials provided opening remarks to set the stage for day.

Steven Harris, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Commemoration, discussed the importance of collaboration and building partnerships. While there is more work to be done in research, data on the subject of women Veterans is growing in scope and availability. He emphasized that the goal of the forum is to encourage conversation and create linkages which will help respond to the needs of women Veterans and their families.

Lorri Biesenthal, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Oversight and Communications, spoke to Canada’s prioritization of gender equality and the importance of bringing a gender lens to our conversations. She noted that the Department is anticipating that a first draft of a Gender Based Analysis Plus Action Plan is on track to be completed by June 2019. She emphasized the importance of systematically applying Gender Based Analysis Plus in all work across the Department.

Elizabeth Stuart, Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services, delivered remarks highlighting the importance of having ongoing conversations about diversity and

inclusion. She spoke to some of the gender discrimination challenges she experienced over several decades during her service in the Canadian Armed Forces. She noted that the issue of gender in the Canadian Armed Forces is complex, and while there have been improvements, it will continue to take time and effort to change the status quo.

# C. Forum Topics and Discussion

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## Research Presentation

Mary Beth MacLean, Health Economist, Veterans Affairs Canada Research Directorate and Dr. Maya Eichler, Assistant Professor, Political Studies and Women's Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University delivered a presentation on "Women Veterans – What do we know and where do we go from here?" (Appendix C). Highlights of this presentation included an overview of the data available on female Veterans (e.g. income following release, health data, mortality rates), the gaps in published, peer-reviewed articles on female Veterans internationally and within Canada specifically, and the research direction moving forward. The presentation introduced two studies that are currently in progress which centre on female Veterans.

## Breakout Sessions and Plenary Discussions

The bulk of the Women Veterans' Forum was dedicated to providing space for participants to meet together to discuss issues relating to programs and services, research, and areas for collaboration. The breakout session topics were based on the following forum objectives:

1. Develop ideas and potential solutions to policy and program challenges facing women Veterans and their families;
2. Present existing research on Canadian women Veterans and discuss directions for future research; and

3. Promote collaboration and build strong networks among women Veterans and stakeholder groups.

From these breakout sessions, the following themes were identified:

### Theme 1: Programs and Services

#### *Access and Awareness*

Throughout the day, participants noted areas where programs and services could be improved, through access and awareness as well as through the development of new programs and services for women Veterans.

Participants commented that it is not always clear what programs and services are available for women Veterans, and that there are challenges accessing programs and services depending on factors such as geographical location or access to online portals. There was an interest in a "one stop shop" for information.

#### *Transition*

Improving services to help releasing members transition to civilian life was a common theme throughout the day.

Additional programs and services that were raised by participants to help support transition from military to civilian life included:

- Increased and reliable access to childcare supports;
- Stronger focus on skills translation during transition;
- Increase qualified peer support programs targeted specifically for women Veterans; and
- Access to a navigator program or person who specializes in programs and services for women Veterans to support transition (either through the provincial health care system, regional services, or through Veterans Affairs Canada).

### ***Health and Well-being***

Programs and services to support the health and well-being of women Veterans was a key topic throughout the day. Participants noted that both during transition to civilian life and after transition, the health and well-being of women Veterans should be a primary focus.

Key points raised included:

- The importance of access to family doctors who have a strong understanding of military culture (and knowledge of women Veterans specifically);
- Recognition of specific health care issues by the Department related to women Veterans;
- A stronger comprehension of military sexual trauma; and
- Development of professional education modules for health care providers on health care issues affecting women Veterans.

Participants suggested that the creation of a Canadian “Centre for Women Veterans” similar to the United States Veterans Affairs model or an “Office of Women’s Health” would help ensure that women Veterans receive appropriate health care services.

## **Theme 2: Research**

During the opening presentation on research, it was noted that there are significant gaps in the literature as it pertains to Canadian women Veterans and the inclusion of sex and gender more broadly in research on Veterans.

There was an strong interest in exploring new areas of research. Some of the research streams proposed included the following areas:

- Examining health and social issues related to women Veterans (e.g. infertility, stress incontinence, menopause, mental health, homelessness);
- Exploring transition from military to civilian life, including the financial impacts of transition for women Veterans;
- Gaining further understanding of intersectionality and cultural differences among under-represented women Veterans, including Indigenous and Inuit women Veterans, women Veterans across the lifespan, and Francophone and LGBTQ+ perspectives;
- Examining the impacts of trauma on women Veterans (e.g. institutional trauma, military sexual trauma, intergenerational trauma);
- Studying evidence-based treatment programs for women Veterans (e.g. peer support programs);
- Developing a clearer understanding of the definition of a women Veteran and interrogating institutional language use; and
- Exploring the institutional cultures and linkages between the Canadian Armed Forces, Veterans Affairs Canada and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, including investigating gender roles and stereotypes.

Throughout the breakout sessions, participants highlighted the importance of ensuring that research is available publicly and that the women Veteran community is involved and engaged in research. There was a focus on participatory research methodology, and the importance of seeing action coming from the research while ensuring these actions are communicated back to the women Veteran community.

### **Theme 3: Collaboration**

Collaboration was a central focus of the forum and the topic of the third breakout session. Participants noted that strong collaboration between key stakeholders will improve information sharing and create robust networks to help support women Veterans and their families.

Some key areas for collaboration included the following:

- Improved collaboration between Federal Government departments (e.g. Canadian Armed Forces, Veterans Affairs Canada, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Employment and Skills Development Canada), including better information sharing among those that provide services to Veterans;
- Increased collaboration with Veteran healthcare providers, service providers, and different levels of government to help identify women Veterans, connect them with programs and services, and identify best practices;
- More opportunities for face to face meetings and forums to improve networking among stakeholders;
- Stronger collaboration between academia, women Veterans and stakeholder groups; and

- Improved collaboration between service providers and the families of women Veterans.

### **Theme 4: Communication and Outreach**

Improving communication and outreach to women Veterans was noted by participants as a key area to address. As women who serve in the Canadian Armed Forces continue to be in the minority, it is important that efforts be made to raise the profile and visibility of women Veterans.

Reaching women Veterans after they release was central topic of discussion. It was noted that multiple methods of communicating with women Veterans are required. For example, it is important not to rely solely on the Internet as some Veterans in geographically remote locations experience difficulty accessing online portals.

Other suggestions for improving communication and outreach to women Veterans included the following:

- Ensure family involvement (e.g. provide information to families of women Veterans);
- Engage stakeholder groups and communities in disseminating information (e.g. municipalities, provinces, health care providers and elders);
- Develop strong advertising campaigns focusing on women Veterans, including increased visibility of women Veterans on social media platforms;
- Create a landing page on the Veterans Affairs Canada website centered on women Veterans;
- Create a Veteran registry; and
- Including a specific focus on women Veterans on My VAC Account.

## Theme 5: Gender Based Analysis Plus

Gender based analysis plus (GBA+) is an analytical process used to assess how diverse groups of women, men and non-binary people may experience policies, programs and initiatives, while also considering other identity factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, age, and mental or physical disability.

The importance of GBA+ was raised throughout many of the discussions during the forum. Some of the topics for further discussion included the following:

- Forum participants noted they were interested in seeing more intersectionality, cultural competency, and diversity in program and policy development, as well as in communications from the Department (e.g. social media or website);
- Participants highlighted the unique needs of women Veterans based on age, geography, indigeneity and whether a Veteran is single or partnered;
- The importance of language was brought forward, for example, using the French translation “vétérane” in lieu of “vétérant” to increase visibility of women Veterans; and
- Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that GBA+ initiatives have measurable requirements and outcomes was emphasized.

# D. Next Steps

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The Women Veterans' Forum provided a valuable opportunity to hear from women Veterans and stakeholders. Moving forward, Veterans Affairs Canada will continue working to ensure women Veterans and their families receive the services they need, where and when they need them, and that this support continues throughout their life.

Engagement with stakeholders is vital to the ongoing work of the Department. Throughout the day, participants underscored the importance of having concrete, tangible and measurable actions come out of the Women Veterans' Forum. To this end, feedback received during the forum will be captured and shared within the Department to inform policy, program and service developments and improvements.

Learning from this forum, Veterans Affairs Canada will continue to engage on a national scale with both internal and external partners. Engagement will be ongoing with other federal departments to ensure a whole of government approach when it comes to supporting the health and well-being of women Veterans and their families. Collaboration at a community level will also be prioritized to ensure women Veterans have awareness of and access to the supports they need throughout the lifespan.

# Appendix A: Agenda

## Veterans Affairs Canada Women Veterans' Forum

May 23, 2019 (0830-1630)

Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island

Delta Hotels Prince Edward

Proposed meeting objectives:

1. Develop ideas and potential solutions to policy and program challenges facing women Veterans and their families;
2. Present existing research on Canadian women Veterans and discuss directions for future research; and
3. Promote collaboration and build strong networks among women Veterans and stakeholder groups.

Agenda		
Time	Agenda Item	Presenter
8:30 - 9:00	<b>Registration and Coffee</b>	All
9:00 - 9:10	<b>Welcome and Overview of the Day</b>	Lisa Campbell, Associate Deputy Minister
9:10 - 9:20	<b>Welcome Remarks</b>	General (retired) Walt Natynczyk Deputy Minister Veterans Affairs Canada
9:20 - 9:35	<b>Presentation:</b> "Setting the Stage"	Lorri Biesenthal, A/Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Oversight and Communications; Steven Harris, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Commemoration and Elizabeth Stuart, Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services
9:35 - 10:20	<b>Women Veterans – What do we know and where do we go from here?</b>	MaryBeth MacLean, Health Economist, Research and Dr. Maya Eichler, Assistant Professor, Political Studies and Women's Studies
10:20 – 10:35	<b>Health Break</b>	All
10:40 - 11:30	<b>Breakout Session 1:</b> Services and programs for women Veterans	All – Discussion Groups
11:35 -	<b>Breakout Session 2:</b>	All – Discussion Groups

12:25	Research on women Veterans	
12:25 - 13:15	<b>Lunch</b>	All
13:20 – 14:10	<b>Breakout Session 3:</b> Areas of collaboration	All – Discussion Groups
14:10 – 14:25	<b>Health Break</b>	All
14:25 – 15:25	<b>Plenary Session 1:</b> Sharing Group Themes	All – Discussion Groups
15:25 – 16:15	<b>Plenary Session 2:</b> Way Forward	All – Discussion Groups
16:15 – 16:30	<b>Closing Remarks</b>	Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Deputy Minister of National Defence

# Appendix B: Participating Organizations

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## Stakeholders

- Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones
- Army, Navy, Air Force Veterans in Canada
- It's Just 700
- McMaster University
- MilitaryWomen.ca
- Mood Disorder Society
- National Association of Federal Retirees
- Operational Stress Injury Support Services
- Perley Rideau Veterans Health Centre
- RESPECT
- Royal Canadian Legion
- Royal Canadian Mounted Police Veterans Association
- Service Women's Salute
- Shaping Purpose
- The Canadian Military and Veteran Families Leadership Circle
- True Patriot Love
- Vanier Institute of the Family
- Veteran Transition Network
- Veterans Emergency Transition Services
- Women Warriors Healing Garden Inc.

## Ministerial Advisory Groups

- Advisory Group on Families
- Care and Support Advisory Group
- Mental Health Advisory Group
- Policy Advisory Group
- Service Excellence Advisory Group

## Government

- Bureau of Pension Advocates
- Canadian Armed Forces
- Canadian Military Intelligence Association
- Department for Women and Gender Equality
- Department of National Defence
- Employment and Social Development Canada
- Minister of Veterans Affairs
- Office of the Minister of Veterans Affairs
- Office of the Veterans Ombudsman
- Royal Canadian Mounted Police
- Status of Women
- Veterans Affairs Canada
- Veterans Review and Appeal Board

# Appendix C: Research Presentation

▼ WOMEN VETERANS FORUM

Veterans Affairs Canada Anciens Combattants Canada

Canada

## Women Veterans: What do we know and where do we go from here?

23 MAY 2018



▼ INTRODUCTION

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Dr. Maya Eichler

- Canada Research Chair Social Innovation and Community Engagement
- Assistant Professor, Political Studies and Women's Studies, Mount Saint Vincent University

Mary Beth MacLean

- Health Economist, Research Directorate, Veterans Affairs Canada
- PhD Student, Aging and Health, Queen's University

Collaboration

- Led female Veteran workshop at CIMVHR 2018 leading to development of research network
- Collaborated on chapter in "Gender Dimensions of Veteran Transition" (forthcoming)



▼ OBJECTIVES

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Present existing research on Canadian women Veterans and discuss directions for future research.

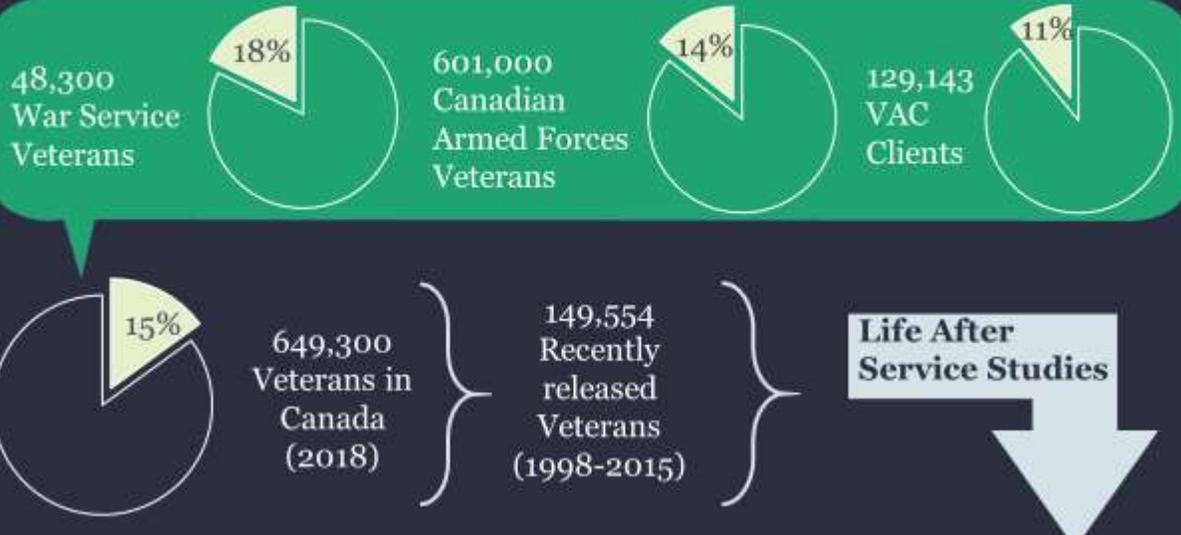
Mary Beth MacLean  
Quantitative Research, Government,  
and sources of data.

Dr. Maya Eichler  
Qualitative Research, Academia,  
and collaboration



▼ THE VETERAN POPULATION IN CANADA

■ Females



The Veteran population captured in the three cycles of LASS (2010, 2013, 2016) has been examined in many ways:

Service Component	Release type	Service area	And more...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular Force</li> <li>Reserve Force (Class C, B, A)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Medical</li> <li>Voluntary</li> <li>Involuntary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Army</li> <li>Navy</li> <li>Air Force</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sex &amp; Age</li> <li>Length of service</li> <li>Year of release</li> </ul>

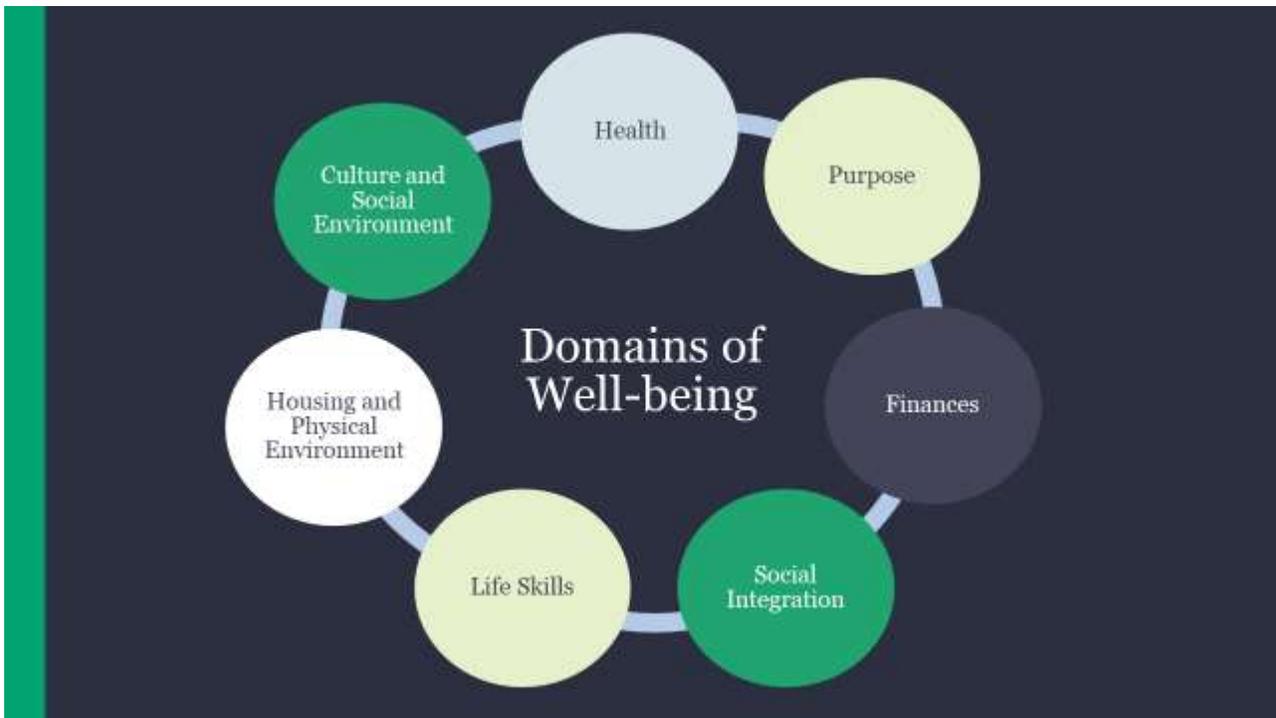
**In LASS 2013 population, recently released Veterans (1998-2012), across service components...**

**Female Veterans were more likely to:**

- have served in the Air Force;
- have served 10-19 years;
- be in administrative, medical, and transferable occupations at release; and
- to have been medically released.

**Male Veterans were more likely to:**

- serve in the Army; and
- to have been in combat arms, engineering and technical, and non-transferable occupations at release.



▼ WELL-BEING SURVEILLANCE FRAMEWORK

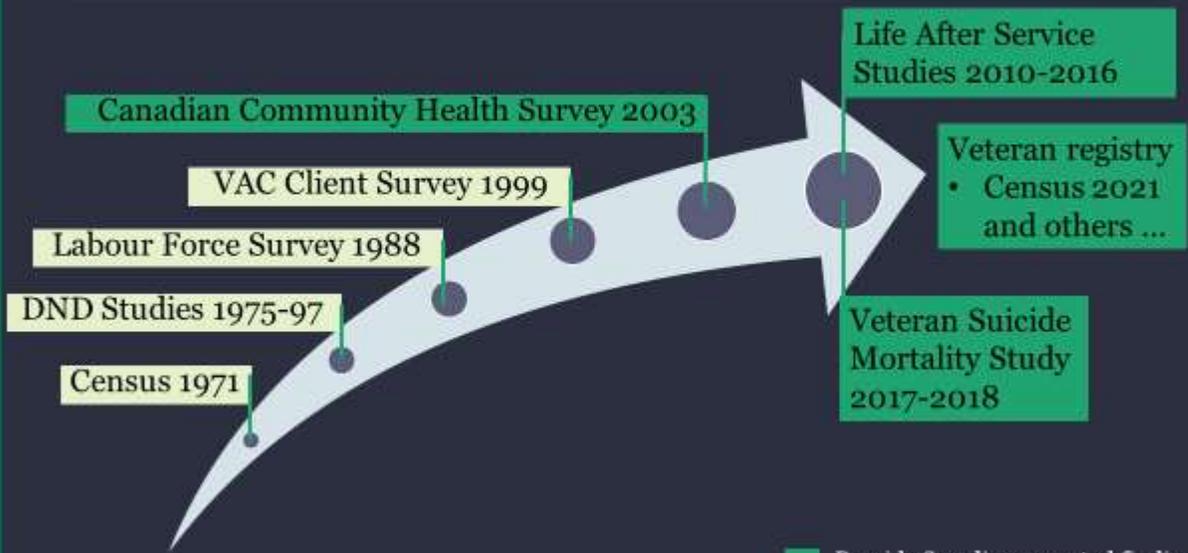
Domain	Indicator	Domain	Indicator
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-rated health</li> <li>• Self-rated mental health</li> <li>• Activity Limitation</li> <li>• Need for assistance with activities of daily living</li> <li>• Suicide, mortality*</li> </ul>	Life Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education level</li> <li>• Daily smoking</li> <li>• Heavy drinking</li> <li>• Obesity</li> <li>• Mastery</li> </ul>
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment rate</li> <li>• Satisfaction with main activity</li> <li>• Satisfaction with life</li> </ul>	Housing & Physical Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Veteran rate among homeless</li> </ul>
Finances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rate of low income</li> <li>• Satisfaction with finances</li> <li>• Changes in income*</li> </ul>	Culture & Social Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canadians' attitudes towards Veterans</li> <li>• Employers' attitudes towards Veterans</li> <li>• Veteran sex, rank and branch at release (by domain)</li> </ul>
Social Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of belonging</li> <li>• Social support scale</li> <li>• Adjustment to civilian life</li> </ul>		

▼ UNTAPPED SOURCES OF DATA

Canadian  
Veteran  
Population  
649,300



▼ DEVELOPING DATA SOURCES



▼ WELL-BEING INDICATOR COMPARISONS

## Female Veterans+ compared Male Veterans

Females better off:

- Heavy drinking\*#
- Mortality^
- Suicide rate^

Females worse off:

- Adjustment to civilian life\*
- Disability\*
- Sat. with main activity\*
- Low income\*
- Income declines\*
- Employment rate\*

+ Regular Force

^ Released 1976 to 2012

\* Released since 1998

# Released <2003

▼ WELL-BEING INDICATOR COMPARISONS

## Female Veterans+ compared Canadian Females

Veterans better off:

- Self-rated health#
- Self-rated mental health#
- Education#
- Mortality^

Veterans worse off:

- Self-rated health\*
- Self-rated mental health\*
- Disability\*
- Satisfaction with life\*
- Sense of belonging\*
- Suicide^

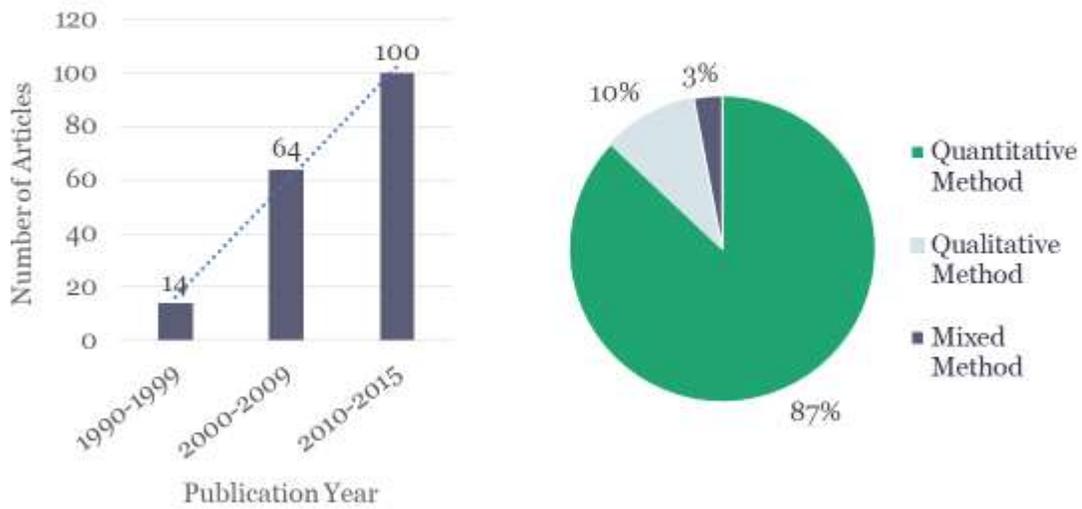
+ Regular Force

^ Released 1976 to 2012

\* Released since 1998

# Released <2003

▼ SCOPING REVIEW OF ACADEMIC LITERATURE ON GENDER AND MCT

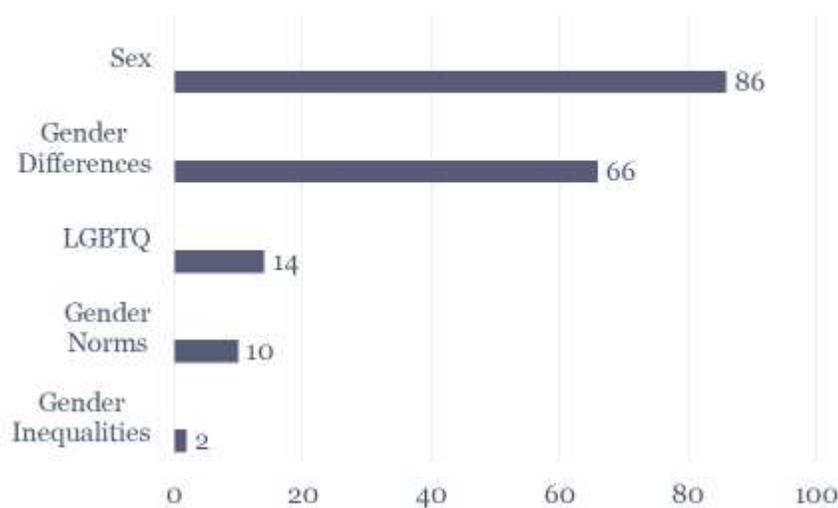


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▼ SCOPING REVIEW OF ACADEMIC LITERATURE ON GENDER AND MCT

Approach to 'Gender'

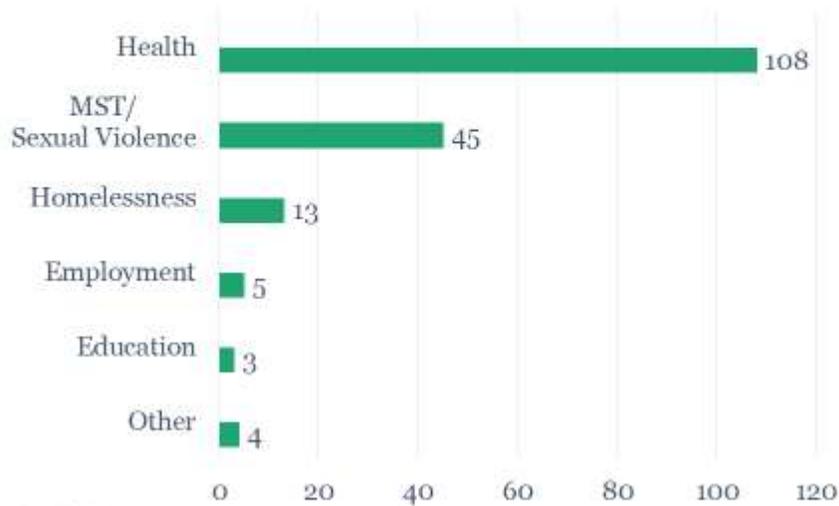


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▼ SCOPING REVIEW OF ACADEMIC LITERATURE ON GENDER AND MCT

### Post-Service Life Focus



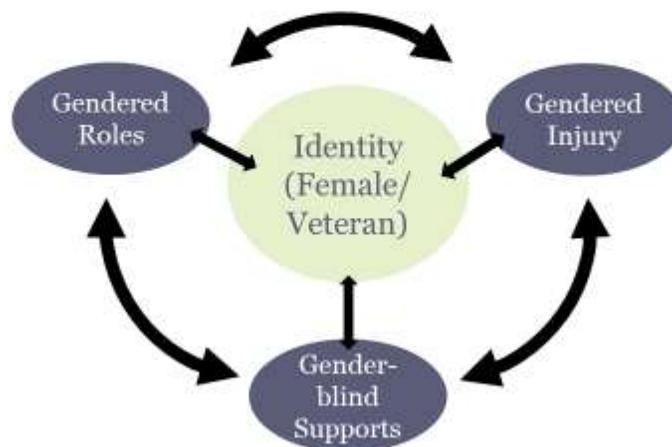
▼ QUALITATIVE CANADIAN RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

- VAC Task 23 longitudinal Study on Wellbeing and Military-to-Civilian Transition  
(PIs: H. Cramm, M. Eichler, D. Blackburn)
- SSHRC study on Gender and the Transition from Military to Civilian Life in Canada  
(PI: M. Eichler)

▼ WHY SEX + GENDER ARE IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER

1. Women's and men's experiences differ in important (though not all) ways;
2. Military and civilian spheres have different (though overlapping) gender norms;
3. 'Gender-blind' policy and programming may have discriminatory outcomes.

▼ TRANSITION EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN VETERANS



“I mean at best we’re at 15% female, and so the system is still set up for men. The system is still set up on the assumption that you are male and that you have a civilian spouse... I think your average female soldier still has it harder because you’re either married to someone still in uniform or you’re single. And still all of the programs, all of the research is still very male-focused.”

