

**Canada’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security: What We Heard from our
Dialogue with Civil Society, Public Servants, and Scholars**

By Kim Beaulieu

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On January 27th, 2022, the Research Network on Women, Peace and Security held its first roundtable on the topic of National Action Plan (NAP). It was divided in two parts, namely a dialogue between scholars and public servants in the morning and a teach-in between scholars and civil society in the afternoon. The roundtable mobilized different stakeholders involved in NAPs planning, implementation, and advocacy to critically engage with Canada’s Plan (C-NAP) in anticipation of its third renewal in 2023. Canada adopted its first NAP in 2011 and its second NAP in 2017. The roundtable’s goal was to share and reflect on the lessons learned from previous C-NAPs and NAPs abroad, a necessary process that has not systematically taken place between scholars, civil society, and public servants.

This report aims to document and share the main ideas and arguments evoked during the roundtable respecting the Chatham house rules. It is a succinct “what we heard” report that everyone can use to reflect and build on to strengthen C-NAP policy design and implementation. It can also potentially open new research avenues for scholars and new paths for action for civil society. The report is divided into three sections: first, it addresses Canada’s successes in the current and previous NAPs; second, it highlights the challenges that C-NAP still faces; and third, it opens the way for creative solutions. As this roundtable has shown, discussions and collaboration are the key to keep the agenda moving forward. We would like to every participant who generously shared their inputs on this topic.

1. Reflecting on Canada’s success and innovation

Canada has played a leading role in integrating and implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda (WPS) at the international stage. It has, for example, co-sponsored and co-chaired with Uruguay the Women, Peace and Security Focal Points Network, a cross-regional forum created by Spain in 2016 to help “set the bar” regarding commitments to WPS. The Network encourages member countries to share their experiences and good practices to strengthen domestic implementation of the WPS agenda. Canada also launched the Elsie initiative in 2017 to increase the participation of uniformed women in UN peace operations, especially in the police and military sectors¹. Many have described the Elsie initiative as a major success for Canada and the global advancement of the WPS agenda within the UN system. Apart from these multilateral commitments, Canada has also successfully mainstreamed gender at the governmental level and created an innovative partnership with civil society to strengthen its NAP implementation domestically. These two aspects have been highlighted as part of Canada’s best practices by the roundtable’s participants.

¹ Government of Canada 2021b.

1.1 Mainstreaming gender at the government level

First, public servants at Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) noted that gender is increasingly part of their day-to-day operations and conversations. This is also visible in multilateral organizations such as NATO, where UNSCR 1325 has challenged long-established ways of dealing with conflict in a gender-blind manner. Gender mainstreaming “seeks to produce transformatory processes and practices that will concern, engage and benefit women and men equally by systematically integrating explicit attention to issues of sex and gender into all aspects of an organization’s work²”. Gender mainstreaming has been very successful at GAC, notably with the adoption of the Feminist International Assistance Policy. The WPS team has also expand from 3 to 6 regular positions. Moreover, many governmental departments are now engaged with implementing the C-NAP. It currently has 9 Action Plan partners³, from which five are focused on domestic implementation. This increase in domestic partners compared to previous plans allows for a better incorporation of domestic concerns, even though more work still needs to be done in this matter. Merging both domestic and international issues in the plan is important to move from this binary conception of NAPs as being tools for “implementation away” by donor countries (mainly from the “Global North”) and tools for “domestic implementation” by conflict-affected countries (mainly from the “Global South”).

1.2 Innovative partnership with civil society

The second aspect of Canada’s success is institutionalizing its partnership with civil society through the Action Plan Advisory Group. It distinguishes the C-NAP in terms of best practices as Canada is the only country to have a co-chair role for civil society. The Advisory Group allows for periodic (2 per year) and special (on an ad hoc basis) meetings between civil society and governmental departments involved in implementing the C-NAP. They discuss challenges, exchange on best practices, and address missing elements. The group is co-chaired by the Women, Peace and Security Network – Canada⁴ and the GAC Peace and Stabilization Operations Program. By institutionalizing this necessary ongoing dialogue between civil society and the government, GAC recognized the central role of civil society in shaping, advising, and monitoring the C-NAP. It creates a platform where civil society expertise can help the government to strengthen its commitment to the WPS agenda. This partnership signifies that civil society is not only part of the consultation process (as is often the case) but is also an active member in the implementation and monitoring processes.

² Woodford-Berger 2007, 124.

³ Global Affairs Canada, the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada and Indigenous Services Canada, Public Safety Canada, Status of Women Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and the Department of Justice

⁴ <https://wpsn-canada.org/>

2. Documenting the Challenges in the Canadian National Action Plan

The first NAP has been criticized for their failure to highlight “the connection between the WPS agenda and issues such as the role of the extractive industry in conflict settings, the growing displacement and migration crisis, and the security dimensions of climate change”⁵. Issues regarding cyber security and LGBTQ2+ can also be added to this list. These missing elements in the C-NAP can in part be attributed to the challenges identified by the roundtable’s participants, namely the difficulty in (1) systematizing current tools, (2) applying a domestic perspective, and (3) measuring progress.

2.1 Current tools and their limit

Public servants and civil society noted that gender mainstreaming was successful at GAC but limited in other agencies. They pointed out that communication and understandings of the WPS agenda are not equal across departments. For example, at the CAF, gender-related questions are asked and answered by gender advisors responsible for providing a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+)⁶ to key CAF leaders to “ensure that the CAF thinks about these aspects when planning, running, and assessing operations”⁷. Although the inclusion of gender advisors in the CAF is a good and necessary progress, broader organizational culture change is still required to see lasting results and effective gender mainstreaming. This culture change involves that the CAF leaders and military themselves engage with questions of inclusion and gender. The CAF leadership must be actively involved in this culture change. There is a real value in having a broad understanding and involvement from everyone, not only gender advisors. As a participant accurately pointed out: “gender advisors are the specialists, but eventually everyone should understand their [analytical] process”. Overall, the architecture for greater gender-responsive ways of doing is in place but is not yet reflexive. A participant called attention to how the nature of the organization itself poses a challenge to this culture change. Because the CAF and, more generally, the defence sector is highly operationally focused, it is difficult to merge crucial long-term reflections such as gender with more short-term pressing actions. In other words, since the CAF leadership is mostly focused on actions related to defence and military operations in the present moment, thinking about perhaps more abstract issues that requires long-term reflections such as gender mainstreaming and inclusion can be challenging. Even though much research has been done on how defence issues interact with gender (e.i. von Hlatky 2015; 2019), there is still a gap between research and action. Integrating gender-related research into often rigid military operating procedures is an ongoing challenge that C-NAP needs to address more seriously.

Another aspect often mentioned by the participants is the complex linkage between GBA+ and the WPS agenda. Many noticed that GBA+ was not consistently used across departments and that the quality of its application varied, therefore pointing to an overall lack of systematization. GBA+ is an analytical process used to inform decision-making at the governmental level. It is a Canadian tool used to assess how gender intersect with policies and programing whereas the WPS agenda is

⁵ Woroniuk, Capelazo and Tuckey, eds. 2018, p.17

⁶ GBA+ is a Canadian tool designed to analytically “assess how different women, men and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives” that is used across many departments at the Canadian government (Government of Canada 2021a).

⁷ Government of Canada 2017

an international normative framework—mostly understood as being related to conflict-affected countries. In that sense, GBA+ is often considered as the “home game” and the WPS agenda as the “away game”. Public servants stressed the need for a better understanding of how GBA + and WPS interact and intersect, meaning how the WPS international framework applies domestically and interlinks with domestic tools such as GBA+. As highlighted by a scholar, what we do domestically and internationally needs to be interconnected for us to be credible in our commitments towards gender equality. Ultimately, Canada’s reputation on domestic gender issues influences the country’s ability to affect change and convince other countries to implement the WPS agenda domestically. “We need to consider this as a « one game » as opposed to different sets of policies and programming”. This points to the next challenge, which is strengthening the domestic implementation of the WPS agenda.

2.2 Strengthening the domestic implementation of the WPS agenda

As stressed by scholars and civil society, “Global North” countries often fail to identify how the WPS agenda relates to their domestic context, which can explain why a majority of their NAPs are outward-oriented rather than inward-oriented. This divide also emphasizes the fact that terms such as “peace” and “security” are defined narrowly. For example, the Global North is not considered a place of insecurity because of the absence of war. These narrow definitions of peace and security make it difficult to implement and think about the WPS agenda domestically. As underlined by a scholar, about 10% of individuals die in formal armed conflict. What does (in)security mean in other contexts where there is no active conflict? Participants highlighted that the WPS agenda is also about structural violence, which can fuel and maintain insecurities. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women exemplifies that those insecurities are part of our domestic reality as well. However, these “issues of reconciliation and security of indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people” have not yet been clearly linked to the WPS agenda.⁸ Systemic problems that fuel gendered violence reach across all countries, and Canada is no exception. Moving the agenda forward, it is essential that Canada reflect on how to engage with intersectionality in its programming. Intersectionality can be defined as “the assertion that social identity categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability are interconnected and operate simultaneously to produce experiences of both privilege and marginalization”⁹. In that sense, it is critical to think about how this focus on women in the WPS agenda can impact other marginalized groups. For example, in the CAF, it is true that women face a structural disadvantage, but so do people who come from other types of minorities such as LGBTQ2+ or ethnic minorities. When intersectionality is not seriously incorporated, there is the danger of confronting one disadvantaged group against another, which can ultimately harm the agenda itself.

Another core aspect of the WPS agenda that could be reinforced domestically is the issue of representation, especially in the CAF. There is currently no action plan or mandate at the political level regarding representation. As stressed by a participant, “top-level [management] is also accountable in terms of representation”. Obligations at the (top-)political level could further Canada’s commitment to the WPS agenda. Also, systemic advantages and disadvantages should

⁸ Woroniuk, Leclerc and St-Pierre, eds. 2021, p.1.

⁹ Smooth 2013, 11.

be considered when promoting individuals, something that the “objective” meritocracy process fails to recognize. Other than the promotion process, organizations such as the military should understand and identify potential barriers to inclusion. No data is currently available on why people leave the military. Inclusion and representation are thus important aspects of the WPS agenda that the C-NAP needs to engage with critically. Ultimately, to strengthen the implementation process, it is crucial to think about incentives. In other words, besides laying out the positive benefits of engaging and implementing good practices related to the WPS agenda, what are the negative consequences of not doing so? Are the incentives aligned with the goals?

2.3 Measuring progress: a difficult task

Measuring progress remains one of the most challenging aspect of the C-NAP. An important issue raised by measurement is the question of outputs versus outcomes. Outputs are the short-term identifiable delivered actions such as the number of mentorship activities or percentage of funding that integrate gender equality, and outcomes are the targeted long-term goals such as women empowerment and transforming structures of inequality. Outputs are more easily measured with quantitative data, whereas outcomes require a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data to obtain a more accurate and complete picture. In the case of the WPS agenda, the outcomes imply a fundamental structural change that cannot be reached at the term of an activity or a budget cycle. Because progress reports often adopt this “ticking the box” approach that focuses on outputs, it can be difficult to assess outcomes. The multiplication of micro measures related to outputs makes it difficult to understand the big picture. For example, in the Progress Report for Canada’s National Action Plan 2017–2022 (Fiscal Year 2018–2020), progress is assessed with numerical data, i.e. statistics about women inclusion in a specific project and the amount of money directed towards a program. This mostly informs us about inputs but provides a limited picture in terms of outcomes. We need to have simple qualitative and quantitative indicators that remain steady throughout time to identify global tendencies and measure outcomes. In this sense, it is crucial to further think about how we measure the outcomes and outputs of the C-NAP.

Overall, a gap remains between qualitative and quantitative data, the latter often being prioritized to assess progress. The prevalence of quantitative over qualitative data has many consequences. For one, it limits the range of actions that can be deployed to fit or respond to this “measurable” quality. This fuels the idea of “what can be counted is what counts”, which cannot account for essential processes such as empowerment. Indeed, to be empowered requires individuals to gain “power from within¹⁰”, which is related to self-esteem, self-respect, and *amour propre*. Empowerment ultimately affects an individual’s ability and willingness to take on an active role in social and political life, a crucial aspect of the WPS agenda. However, these elements or qualities are very challenging to measure with short-term quantitative data. Therefore, incorporating more qualitative data and long-term story telling that focuses on bringing voices into the evaluation process can further our understanding of how leadership evolves and contributes to our success stories.

¹⁰ Rowlands 1998.

3. New alternatives through creative solutions

Even though the WPS agenda is a question of fundamental human rights, some note that there is a need to quantify the agenda's success to legitimize its existence. There is no doubt that measuring success and progress is an important part of the implementation, but it should not dictate the way in which we measure progress. Like the yearly report to Parliament, specific reports are not an effective tool to adequately measure progress and implementation as they are not systematically followed by a specific group or committee each year. WPS reporting should be integrated in other annual reporting mechanisms, so it is not a siloed process that overburdens public servants. Having legal obligations enshrined in legislation towards implementing the C-NAP could also be an interesting solution to address the question of incentives by increasing the cost of not acting. The United States is currently one of the only countries to have this kind of legal obligation. Another way of encouraging implementation would be the possibility for an institutionalized peer-review process across countries and institutions. This type of initiative could help with the innovative gathering of data and push the agenda forward. As of September 2021, 98 countries have adopted NAPs. A peer-review process could allow broad consultation and exchange on best practices and common challenges.

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