

DND COMMENTS ON  
COMMUNICATIONS PLAN  
EQUALITY RIGHTS RESPONSE

General

1. The following are offered for incorporation into your communications plan for attachment to the Cabinet Document on equality rights:

- a. Public Environment - Women in Combat;
- b. Public Environment - Homosexuals in the Armed Forces;
- c. Strategy;
- d. Major Themes; and
- e. Question and Answer re: Women in Combat.

Public Environment - Women in Combat

2. On the issue of women in combat there has been considerable press coverage but no public debate. A few feminists feel strongly that the ability to serve in combat is a symbolic right which must be obtained by women as a question of principle. REAL women oppose this approach, also on grounds of principle. A larger group, mainly those who can remember World War II and Korea or those with previous military service, feel equally strongly that depending on women to fight in the front lines would jeopardize the effectiveness of Canada's armed forces. The great majority of Canadians have little knowledge or understanding of the issue and only wish to see women offered equal opportunity to get "jobs" in the government service and to avoid being subjected to unreasonable discrimination. When asked to indicate a preference in August 1985, a slight majority (54%) favoured allowing women to serve in combat. The Department of National Defence has not joined in the public discussion.

3. Press coverage and comment has sporadically highlighted misperceptions of DND policy. In May 85, an unapproved draft DND paper led to mischievous press suggestions that lovemaking in the trenches, menstrual cycles, etc., were

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what concerned military leaders. The statements of a small group of activists, principally Ms. Shirley Robinson, a retired officer, generated equally erroneous reports that women were denied advancement because of current policy and that future wars would be of a "push-button" nature. Editorialists joined in the criticism on the basis of these misperceptions.

4. Letters to the Editor have been limited in number, tending to support current policy. Shirley Robinson has been the principal author of critical letters.

5. Only three major media outlets felt that the issue of women in combat was worth an in-depth report. One was by Leslie Shepherd of the Canadian Press, who used Access to Information to obtain official reports on DND trials of women in combat support roles in Europe. A second was a three-part series in the Halifax Chronicle-Herald by J.A. Fulton, a retired officer, who supported current policy. The third was a two-part report on the military training of women by Rosie DiManno, who played the part of a recruit at Base Cornwallis and wrote about her experiences for The Toronto Star.

6. It is worth noting that these three extensive reports - two of them written by women - were factual and generally tended to explain and support, in whole or in part, the DND/CF position on women in combat. The CP coverage by Leslie Shepherd, widely published across Canada, highlighted the difficulties experienced by women during the trials in Europe, which helped to illustrate that the issues are not simple and straightforward. Rosie Di Manno highlighted the physical difficulties for women of non-combat basic training. The most openly supportive series was that of the Halifax Chronicle-Herald; it nevertheless drew no unfavourable comment from readers.

7. The views of those most concerned, the women in the Canadian Forces, have not been publicized. Those who participated in the land trials feel that women could serve in certain logistics support functions; only fifteen percent feel that women could serve in the Engineers and Artillery; women participants were unanimous that they should NOT serve in the Infantry and the Armour. There is no significant demand by women to serve in the combat trades.

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8. In summary, it would appear that the majority of Canadians are only slightly interested and not very knowledgeable about the issue of women in combat. What general awareness does exist has been influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the preponderance of superficial coverage given to critics of the current policy of the Canadian Forces and tends to be somewhat negative.

9. Therefore, in announcing its decision, the Government should be prepared to remove some of the misperceptions about the current status of women in the Forces and its reasons for continuing to avoid recruiting women for those trades where they would be obligated to enter combat. If the Government appears to be responsible in its decision and forthcoming in its explanation, there is every reason to believe that the majority of Canadians will accept it although in the short term, some elements of the press may not be able to resist a last round of superficial criticism.

Public Environment - Homosexuals in the Armed Forces

10. With respect to the question of sexual orientation among members of the Canadian Forces, there has been very little public discussion. Media queries to the Department of National Defence focus almost exclusively on why the Canadian Forces have not taken measures to test and exclude carriers of AIDS, as is being done in the armed forces of other countries. The public does not appear to consider the recruitment of homosexuals as an important issue and would not react strongly to a decision to maintain current policy.

Strategy

11. DND will undertake an active public information program to raise the level of awareness and understanding of the Canadian public about the current status of women serving in the Canadian Forces through speeches, background material and through the news media. A background information paper will be provided for inclusion in the media kit to be distributed at the time of the Government announcement.

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APPENDIX I

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Major Themes

12. Women in Combat. The Canadian Forces have led the world in opening up career opportunities for women, and will continue to pursue this policy to the greatest extent possible.

Question and Answer

Women in Combat

13. Answer. We have carefully considered whether women should be recruited into military trades which would obligate them to enter combat. We noted that Canada has now gone further than virtually all other societies in the world in terms of providing opportunities for women to serve their country in their Armed Forces. Those who entered in the 1970s, when this opportunity to serve was expanded, are now moving into positions of leadership in their field, competing with men on the basis of merit alone, and this process will continue.

Extensive trials involving servicewomen in non traditional environments and roles are being finalized and will guide us in making whatever further changes are possible, while ensuring the continued operational effectiveness of the Canadian Forces.

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