

BUILDING A SAFE PASSAGE FOR INDIGENOUS W2STGD+



PEOPLE IMPACTED BY SEXUAL
MISCONDUCT IN CAF/DND



**MMIWG2S+ DEPARTMENT
OF NATIONAL DEFENSE
ROUNDTABLE**

REPORT

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Building a Safe Passage for Indigenous W2STGD+ People Impacted by Sexual Misconduct in CAF/DND



Content Warning: To provide recommendations based on the lived experience of misconduct in the CAF and DND, This document mentions mental health, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, self h*rm, sexual, colonial, and other forms of violence.

THIS REPORT, prepared by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) for the Department of National Defence, is comprised of the knowledge, experiences, and recommendations gathered during NWAC's MMIWG2S+ Department of National Defence Roundtable.

The roundtable was held virtually on February 9, 2024, from 1:00-3:00 pm EDT and engaged with Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse (W2STGD+) people who are members or former members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) or the Department of National Defence (DND) and/or have experienced sexual or other forms of misconduct in the CAF or DND. The purpose of this roundtable was to respond to the need for relevant services and supports for the defence community and gather recommendations for the DND's Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre. It was also intended to begin to bridge the gap in knowledge about the experiences of Indigenous W2STGD+ people in the defence community and provide culturally specific recommendations to increase their safety and wellbeing in the CAF and DND.



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Methodology

THE ROUNDTABLE participants had diverse lived experiences and gender identities and were either current serving members of the CAF, spouses/partners to those serving, or seasoned previous members with decades of relevant experience to reference prior to receiving an honourable discharge. The session was opened in good way by an Elder with a welcoming song and was led by a facilitator who guided the discussion with questions prepared by NWAC's MMIWG2S+ unit.

The experiences and perspectives shared with NWAC during this sharing circle serve as the basis for six recommendations. These recommendations align with the National Inquiry's 231 Calls for Justice, NWAC's Action Plan, and the findings of the Report of the Independent External Comprehensive Review of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces. The recommendations included in this report are preliminary and will require a broader knowledge gathering process including additional sharing circles in multiple regions to ensure that all distinctions are represented¹.

¹ A distinctions-based approach accounts for the distinct lived-experiences between First Nations—on- and off-reserve, urban, status and non-status, disenfranchised—Inuit, and Métis peoples.

Indigenous W2STGD+ People in the Defence Community



THE PARTICIPANTS of the roundtable each shared the feeling of not belonging in the patriarchal culture of the CAF and DND, and these feelings of marginalization were expressed as two-fold due to both their cultural and gender identities. Experiences of bullying and harassment were ubiquitous, and this treatment was considered part and parcel of a role that they needed to accept to retain their jobs and provide for their families. They all shared experiences of sexual harassment and a near constant onslaught of undue attention with inappropriate innuendos as well as sexist, homophobic, and transphobic attacks that made them feel unsafe and negatively impacted their wellbeing. For instance, one participant said, “if members don’t ‘pass’ as cisgendered, they are subject to bullying a lot of the times,” and her partner considered de-transitioning to “make things easier for others” and protect them from violence.



Indigenous members who self-identified experienced discrimination, higher levels of harassment with racist language, as well as physical assaults that created trauma. For instance, one participant recalled even those who were recruited through an Indigenous-specific program, the Canadian Forces Indigenous Entry Program (CFIEP), felt discriminated against and that they were not provided with equal opportunities offered to other non-Indigenous people. Moreover, all roundtable participants agreed that appropriate reporting mechanisms and supports were not available to them. Participants shared that these experiences left lasting psychological and emotional injuries, and they provided culturally-relevant recommendations to ensure all Indigenous W2STGD+ defence community members are welcome and feel safe to be who they are regardless of how they identify, particularly for younger generations that will be entering the CAF and DND. The list below highlights in brief three key themes to support the prevention of sexual and other forms of misconduct in the defence community that emerged during the roundtable with six corresponding recommendations.

Themes and Recommendations



Cultural Safety

RECOMMENDATION 1 - Provide compulsory cultural competency training and educational modules about the history and impacts of colonization for all members of the CAF and DND.

Participants said that there is a knowledge gap and lack of cultural understanding in the CAF and DND that contributes to bigotry and discrimination against Indigenous W2STGD+ people. Educating all members of the CAF and DND about the history of colonization including its systemic impacts and legacy as well as increasing cultural awareness is important for combating racism and other forms of violence against Indigenous W2STGD+ people across all ranks. Participants said that buy-in from leaders is required because they set the tone and agenda of the organizations, and education led by those in power has a higher chance of correcting ignorance in a hierarchical structure. They said that hearts must be changed before minds, and initiatives such as the blanket exercise will “take some of the eye rollers and change their hearts by placing them in the moccasins of Indigenous people”.

RECOMMENDATION 2 - Provide the necessary resources and permanent funds required to ensure cultural safety for Indigenous W2STGD+ members such as the availability of Elders and Knowledge Keepers as well as spaces and time dedicated to cultural practices.

Indigenous W2STGD+ people must have access to their distinct cultural and spiritual practices to ensure their cultural rights. Participants shared that recently efforts have been made to increase the accessibility of Eagle Staffs, Sweat Lodges, Indigenous gardens, and Inukshuks to support Indigenous members. However, barriers still exist due to a lack of dedicated funds as well as limited cultural competency. For instance, a participant shared that five spiritual days a year are given to Indigenous members, but “if it is not on the calendar, the chain of command does not understand it”. There is also need for additional cultural-specific supports such as access to ceremony, Elders and Knowledge Keepers to connect with, particularly after a member has been impacted by traumatic events, to provide emotional, mental support, and spiritual guidance to ensure they feel cared for in a culturally-relevant way.

Reporting and Accountability

RECOMMENDATION 3 - Provide culturally appropriate, trauma-informed care and a safe space for survivors when they are reporting incidents of misconduct.

RECOMMENDATION 4 - Ensure effective and clear reporting processes with accountability mechanisms. The reporting process must occur outside the member's unit to protect them from reprisal, retaliation, or other repercussions.

Participants said that there is currently no effective process for reporting misconduct. An online grievance reporting form is available, but CAF members have been told if they "report sexual harassment they will be walking on eggshells for the rest of their career" and that repercussions would be long-lasting, rendering reporting "not worth it". There is also no guarantee of follow-through to ensure that the appropriate disciplinary and protective measures are enacted. Moreover, the use of an online form to report experiences of sexual violence is not trauma-informed, as describing the event without a safe space created by a supportive person with appropriate cultural sensitivity training and a trauma-informed approach can be harmful. The lack of confidence in the reporting process and appropriate safe spaces to share details about the harm experienced creates a barrier to reporting and allows the cycle of violence to continue.



The background of the page is a photograph of a crowd of people at what appears to be a protest or demonstration. In the upper left, a large sign with the letters 'MOM' is visible. In the foreground, a man wearing a dark baseball cap and sunglasses is seen in profile, looking towards the left. He is wearing a dark jacket. To his right, another person is partially visible, wearing a blue jacket. In the lower right, a person is holding a brown paper bag. A white, stylized sunburst or starburst graphic is positioned near the bottom center of the page, partially overlapping the text box and the background image.

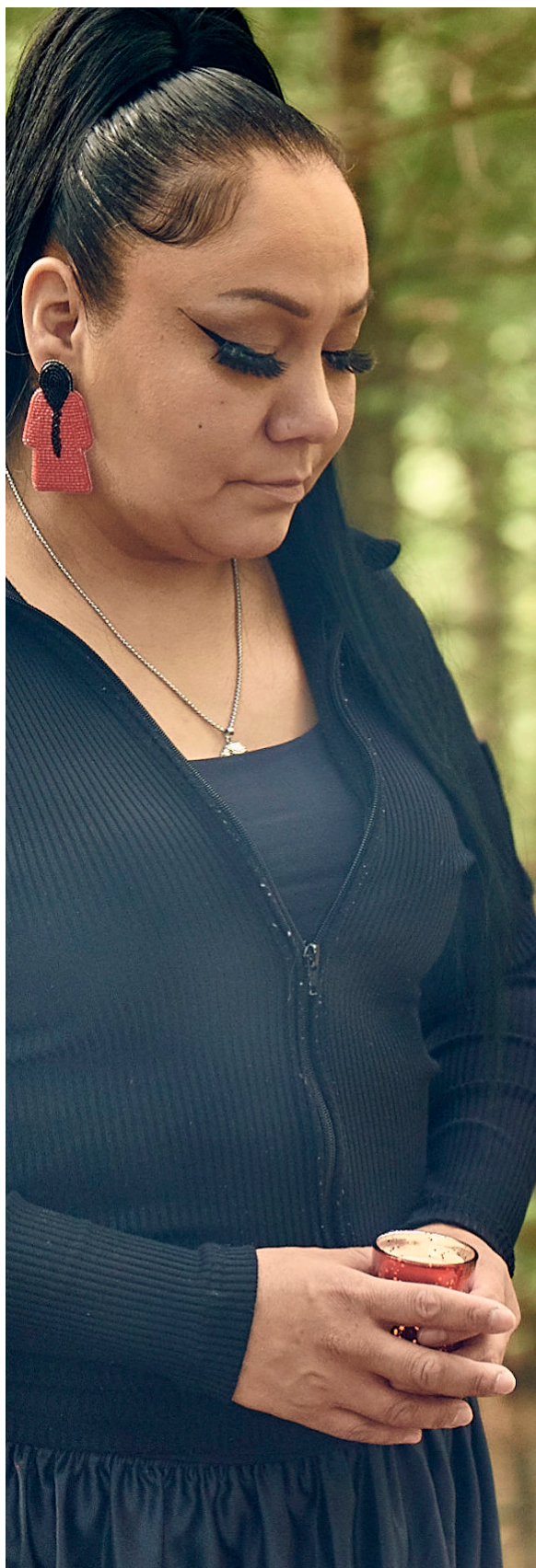
Mental Health Support

RECOMMENDATION 5 - Provide appropriate and accessible mental health services including aftercare support for Indigenous W2STGD+ people reporting misconduct to help them feel heard and believed.

RECOMMENDATION 6 - Increase knowledge about the supports that are available and counter the stigma surrounding mental health support in the CAF and DND with awareness campaigns.

Participants shared that mental health support such as counselling is available to members of the defence community, but many are unaware of the services in place. Additionally, prevailing attitudes and stigma around seeking out these resources results in people feeling ostracized or perceived as a “nutcase” with something “seriously wrong,” which compounds the already existing alienation of being an Indigenous W2STGD+ person in the CAF or DND. Furthermore, participants who have made use of available services shared that the mental health resources are not adequate with some recounting experiences that caused additional harm. One participant shared that when seeking support after experiencing the suicide of a close friend, she was told by her counsellor that because she had already experienced death in her life, she did not need additional support for this experience.

Conclusion



THE INDIGENOUS W2STGD+ defence community members who participated in the roundtable discussion shared their experiences and recommendations to address misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces and the Department of Defence. They identified preliminary pathways toward establishing safety for Indigenous W2STGD+ people in the CAF and DND such as cultural sensitivity training, effective reporting mechanisms, and appropriate cultural and mental health supports.



NWAC's MMIWG2S+ unit will gather and upload resources to support the safety and wellbeing of Indigenous W2STGD+ people in the CAF and DND to the Resource Center on NWAC's Safe Passage website – a community-driven, trauma-informed, and survivor centered website featuring research and educational tools.

Though NWAC's MMIWG2S+ Department of National Defence Roundtable conversation was rich and provided valuable initial finds, there were limitations posed by the small number of participants. Further knowledge gathering is required, particularly to include regional and distinctions-based perspectives.

ANNEX A:

Roundtable Questions

1

What culturally safe resources,

relevant services, and/or supports should be in place to ensure the safety of Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse (W2STGD+) people that are working or interacting with the Canadian Armed Forces or the Department of National Defence?

2

What systemic and/or structural transformations,

relevant services, and/or supports should be in place to ensure the safety of Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse (W2STGD+) people that are working or interacting with the Canadian Armed Forces or the Department of National Defence?

3

What systemic and/or structural transformations,

relevant services, and/or supports should be in place to ensure the safety of Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse (W2STGD+) people that are working or interacting with the Canadian Armed Forces or the Department of National Defence?

