



# Lessons to learn: Strategies to sustain a restorative program for survivors of military sexual trauma

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## ABSTRACT

Since the release of the Deschamps Report in 2015, efforts have been made within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Department of National Defence (DND) to develop and employ programs and services to support people with lived experiences (PWLE) of military sexual trauma (MST). Based on a pilot initiative, the current paper describes some strategies that may contribute to the success of programs aimed at reconciliation and recovery for both people who have been directly harmed and the institution as a whole. These strategies are grounded in the specific context of those reconciling the trauma from MST and consistent with the wider landscape of research and best practices for restorative programs. Strategies include creating a sustainability plan; enhancing planning and preparation; strengthening meeting frameworks; and developing post-meeting strategies. Many of these strategies are aimed at addressing institutional betrayal and healing for survivors and representatives of the organization.

**Key Words** Social innovation; restorative practices; military sexual trauma; people with lived experiences; Canadian Armed Forces.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, an external review of sexual misconduct and sexual harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) was conducted, culminating in the release of a report from Madame Justice Marie Deschamps, commonly known as the Deschamps Report (the Report) (Deschamps, 2015; Eichler, 2016). Justice Deschamps acknowledged that it was time for CAF leadership to address issues of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the Canadian military. For the purposes of this paper, we will utilize the definition of military sexual trauma (MST) as defined in 2023 by the Government of Canada as “any sexual or sexualized activity that occurs without the person’s consent, during their service as a member of the CAF, and the physically or psychologically traumatic impacts of this activity on the affected person. The spectrum of MST can vary from small impact to severe disorders” (Heber et al., 2023). The Report’s findings focused

on the current state of CAF culture, the under-reporting of sexual misconduct and sexual harassment incidents, inadequate/ineffective processes and procedures related to reporting, and existing sexual misconduct and sexual harassment resources and training. The Report included 10 key recommendations to set a new path forward for the culture of CAF.

The Report identified a gap between the standards and expectations espoused within formal documentation around sexual misconduct and the lived experiences of military members (Deschamps, 2015). The Report’s summary of findings highlighted a significant organizational cultural challenge: members appeared to become accustomed to the sexualized culture of the CAF organization as they moved up the ranks. Under-reporting, according to the Report, existed because of a culture of fear of repercussions and negative impact on career advancement. Generally, the Report identified a lack of trust in the reporting process which directly

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impacted reporting rates. Despite the growing number of programs and services available to support people with lived experiences (PWLE)<sup>1</sup> of sexual misconduct, the Report identified access challenges related to geography and lack of evidence supporting program and service efficacy. Health-based support services provided by nursing, social work, and physicians were provided; however, the quality of care appears to have been inconsistent. The Report demonstrated that there was mandatory, regular training including prohibiting sexual conduct, but with very little effect. The training was not taken seriously by members and the instructional methods of teaching this sensitive topic were generally ineffective.

Sexual trauma that occurs within the military is unique because the environment or culture in which the harm occurs plays a significant role in the response and impact of the harm (Brownstone et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2018). Military-specific ethos of masculinity, power, duty, and sacrifice create unique circumstances for MST survivors when deciding if and when to speak out on their experience. MST is often related to experiences of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) arising from incidents of sexual assault or harassment that can lead to feelings of institutional betrayal following the incidents (Kelly, 2021). Institutional betrayal caused by MST is unique, as it relates specifically to an organization or institution (like the CAF) failing to respond appropriately, or at all, to a traumatic event (Andresen et al., 2019). Institutional betrayal in cases of MST often refers to the military's inappropriate handling of a survivor's experiences.

From the Report's recommendations, the CAF created the Sexual Misconduct Response Centre (now the Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre, or SMSRC) and initiated Operation HONOUR (Deschamps, 2015). This initiative was approached like a military operation with the intended goal of eradicating sexual misconduct and harassment in the CAF. Despite the efforts made to implement the Report's recommendations, ongoing military sexual misconduct has continued in the CAF. Therefore, there is a need for innovative approaches to drive culture change and create opportunities for those directly impacted to rebuild and recover. Volunteers from the peer support group It's Not Just 20K (INJ20K) took action and began planning meetings between PWLE of MST and CAF leadership. These meetings, dubbed "critical conversations (CC)," reflect the literature that highlights specific characteristics of restorative programs to ensure the safety and recovery of those affected.

### What Are Critical Conversations?

These meetings were facilitated by volunteers from the survivor advocacy organization INJ20K. The CC facilitated a mostly informal, survivor-directed environment where PWLE had the opportunity to share their experiences collaboratively with CAF leadership. This provided a forum to share their stories and perspectives on the harm caused by MST with CAF leadership in hopes of improving the insti-

tution's response to MST. CC were an innovative approach to address the dialectical and community-orientated aspects of recovery through direct engagement of PWLE with military leadership. The CC also provided an opportunity for organizers to share strategies for dealing with disclosures of MST in a trauma-informed way. Although not specifically using principles of *restorative justice*, these meetings facilitated an approach akin to *restorative practices* to inform the journey surrounding MST. Restorative practices can be used in instances of conflict or harm in organizational settings to repair relationships using "principles of democratic inclusion, participation, problem-solving, mutual responsibility, and respectful dialogue" (Verma, 2019). Restorative engagement is primarily focused and used to enhance relationships by ending harmful practices and restoring trust (Vernon, 2017). These concepts provide potential applications for future practices aimed at addressing similar types of issues. To understand the potential of restorative programs, such as the CC, we interviewed PWLE of MST who met with CAF leadership to discuss the impact that MST has had on their lives.

### Replicating Forms of Restorative Practices

The CC, shaped by ideas of *restorative practice*, provide a unique opportunity to allow survivors to lead and engage in meetings that facilitate opportunities for healing. We are utilizing MST within the CAF as our case study to show how other organizations or institutions could potentially replicate a similar program. For organizations or institutions that may wish to implement such a program, there are four key components that warrant careful consideration when developing restorative programs: (1) creating a sustainability plan, (2) enhancing planning and preparation, (3) strengthening the meetings, and (4) developing post-meeting strategies.

### Creating a Sustainability Plan

In any hierarchical institution, leadership buy-in and support for this type of *restorative practice* is required for success. For the CC, invitations to participate were sent to leadership and PWLE, and participants bore witness to the power of restorative engagement on members of the organization and PWLE. The key to sustainability of many grassroots programs is to shift the oversight and responsibility of those leading the program from the community members to the organization or leadership itself. In Canada, this would help with increasing the CAF's responsibility in expanding current efforts toward culture change. One of the participants in the CC underscored the need to include multiple governmental organizations, as follows:

The role of the other institutions like CDA (Canadian Defence Academy), SM[S]RC (Sexual Misconduct [Support and Resource] Centre), CPCC (Chief, Professional Conduct and Culture) would be to inform what else needs to be part of it ... [How] does it play into the overall scheme of things? How does it play into leadership training? How does it play into culture change? Who's going to oversee it? How are we going to train future facilitators? How are we going to make sure that they're ready?

<sup>1</sup>We recognize that this term does not represent all individuals who have experienced military sexual trauma. Through discussions with collaborators who have experienced MST (including some of whom took part in this innovation), this is the term we have agreed to use for the purposes of this article.

With CC being an initiative born out of conversations between PWLE and military leadership, subsequently held in a hybrid format (in person and virtual) at multiple locations across Canada, participants expressed that sustainability of the meetings was a key concern, both for funding and human power. Participants expressed support for the CC and acknowledged the overwhelming positive reception the meetings have received from the CAF thus far. To ensure momentum, study participants described the need for CC to develop into a robust and structured program, as shared by this participant:

The only concern I have is that when you provide something that is not fine-tuned or where it needs to be, we risk creating a legacy there. I'll give you some good examples. So, we [had] something called Operation Honour in the military. It was a program to promote awareness on these topics. It achieved some objectives but totally missed the mark on other ones... So, yes of course, this is better than nothing, but I think there is some substantial enhancements that need to occur to make it what it could and should be.

An important factor identified to ensure sustainability of the CC focused on the financial support required. Financial sustainability enables adequate training and support for facilitators and removes barriers to inclusion from within the PWLE community. One participant argued that consistent governmental funding of CC, either from DND/CAF or Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC), would strongly influence how MST is currently prioritized. They state:

We're volunteering our free time and we've given enough. Like, there's been so much taken from us. We've paid a high price. We get something out of it. It's meaningful and stuff but like until people are properly compensated, they're not truly valued. ... There's just something that feels, as wonderful as it all is, there's just that some 'ick' feeling [...]. But, you know, like in the back of your mind it's like why are we doing this for free? Like this is one of the most valuable services that could be provided to the military at this time to shape its culture moving into trying to bring it into the modern world or whatever and moving into the future to make it a viable, sustainable organization moving forward. That people will want to join and be able to be a part of, like, what greater value could be offered to the future of the Canadian Armed Forces right now?

This participant goes on to describe the connectedness of financial and moral priorities and how this is a way for an organization to show their values and level of commitment to the people it serves:

I don't know if you've heard this before, but budgets are moral documents and if you look at someone's budget, personal, organizational, whatever, you see where the priorities are and what they're investing in and what they place value on. It sends an important message to leaders and to the whole, the organization as a whole like when it's a line item in a budget and when it's compared to other things that are important.

## Enhancing Planning and Preparation

Reflecting on the CC, participants shared strategies for how to enhance the preparation for future meetings. One participant observed that there was a level of uncertainty that several CAF leaders expressed at the beginning of one of the CC which impacted the trajectory of the meeting. This observation highlighted the need for better coordination between the CAF and organizers to ensure that the participants were fully informed on what to expect. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, this would increase the feelings of safety and increase the level of engagement for all involved. One participant shared:

We did hear from several people from [name of location] that told us that, "I was ordered to be here, I don't even know what it's about, I have no idea." Them coming in cold, especially to something so sensitive and being a critical conversation. You kinda want people to be in the right mindset. Everyone has to be vulnerable. I mean if they really put themselves in it, it is sensitive so, I think that would be important or maybe even just the communication of these sessions to ensure that people know what they're getting into and, and I mean that's part of being trauma-informed as well.

There was widespread acknowledgement that every person's journey of recovery is unique, layered, and complex. Some participants shared that their involvement in CC has been beneficial to their own journey; however, there is no doubt that CC are emotional and despite the benefits expressed, participants were also aware of the risk of harm if PWLE or leadership are not at a point in their healing where they feel ready for this kind of conversation. Participants suggested "screening" and appropriate training processes for PWLE who could act as facilitators for these types of CC:

If a facilitator is ... struggling at times to deal with their own trauma ... perhaps we need to be better positioned to assess someone's current circumstances ... of where they're at in their journey and assess whether or not they are appropriate for that facilitator role ... we [could] come up with a training ... and then you have a screening tool for lack of a better term because, you know, not everyone is well suited to be a facilitator and then you have a training session. That training session is followed usually by a partnership so you would have a trusted facilitator and a facilitator under assessment.

As indicated earlier, there was concern for the well-being and readiness of PWLE to be a part of CC either as participants or facilitators. Participants were informally screened by the lead organizers of each session for readiness to participate. Participants utilized self-determination in gauging their own ability to engage and participate in this type of restorative practice. The concern around emotional safety is an essential consideration when thinking about holding similar types of meetings. One participant commented on the necessity to ensure that there are resources and tools in place to be able to manage the potentially triggering nature of the meetings:

I think [it] could be potentially harmful if you didn't have that ability to set those boundaries ... I worry about

bringing folks in who aren't ready [...]. For me, it is the harm part, that would be me bringing somebody into a group and not ensuring that they were safe. [...] [Maybe] mentorship with somebody who has participated, who is healthy - there's a framework there to make sure that people are safe ... it has potential for really great things but there is potential there for serious harm for participants.

### Strengthening the Meeting Framework

Suggestions were made on how to strengthen the work already established in the existing CC format. For some of the study participants, there was uncertainty about the objective and intended structure of CC. One participant shared their thoughts on how to enhance the learning potential of these meetings by focusing on including clear outcomes and incorporating different activities:

What information do we wanna pass on? What are we trying to have people involved with these conversations leave with? Even if they're leaving with ... an understanding of either what people with lived experience go through, or an understanding of the environment in the CAF ... I think that still could be a valuable process to go through and really help us to structure and focus on what points we wanna make sure [CAF leadership] are getting out there.

Building on the need to enhance the learning potential of CC, one participant felt that it could be beneficial to frame future meetings as training or educational opportunities. As a grassroots initiative, there was a significant learning curve that provided the opportunity to address the shortcomings for future sessions. They shared the following:

The biggest barrier that this training faces right now ... is the [confusion] for participants and the leaders. [During preparation day] there was so much debate back and forth about what could be covered, what couldn't be covered, and the problem with conversations, and I noticed this in the first session lots of questions about what the audience thought. But at the end of the day, the audience is present because they feel they lack the tools, the knowledge, skills and abilities to operate in this environment ... to deal with military sexual trauma. So conversations are okay for sharing experiences and discussing points but you also need to recognize that this is a workshop or a teaching environment and we need to address that.

In contrast, this participant appreciated the unstructured nature of the current meeting format as it created an environment conducive to inspired discussions. They shared the following thoughts:

Then you know people can just like get more words in and the conversation can really just bounce around and just be open and brainstorm-y and I think it just kind of opens up more of the creative brain. You know, and it's a little bit less analytical and learning-y and more organic and creative.

Expanding on this, one participant noted the strength of providing opportunities for smaller group discussions. In particular, the participant felt that creating small groups would contribute to an atmosphere of collaborative thinking as they perceived the CC as an opportunity to be solution focused. They felt that small groups were an effective way to increase awareness of the impact of MST on people's health, well-being, careers, and relationships. They stated:

So small group discussion is a good tool. The concept of doing a PowerPoint presentation in front of a large group is not effective whatsoever. So the meeting that I attended, they broke off into small groups which was great and those facilitated discussions [were] largely around practical applications of a trauma informed approach ... where you get effective and true learning and understanding is through engagement and how people will be engaged is in those small group discussions where they feel that their opinions are heard ... they are part of the process of guiding that enhanced awareness.

This could be applied to both in-person and virtual attendance. Some CC offered a virtual attendance option over Zoom. This option increased accessibility for participants who could not travel or could not secure funds to attend in person, increasing the geographic reach of the meetings. However, attending virtually, potentially alone, can increase the risk for harm due to less opportunity for casual follow-up or debriefing (and as addressed earlier, having the structure of resources after CC). If virtual attendance is a necessary option to remove barriers for broader participation, there is a need to ensure that the appropriate resources and supports are provided regardless of the mode of participation. One participant recalled how the meetings incorporated mental health professionals to provide immediate support to in-person attendees. This would ostensibly also be beneficial to virtual attendees.

I think that's a really, really great [...] thing to do [...] ... one person may be having a difficult time, then the social worker or the support person will go out and check on that person, so that's great. They make it known, so they give the phone number, contact information for those support people and let everyone in the room and the people participating, the facilitators or moderators know that, like, you can call this person any time including in the next few days and such, so I think that is good to do.

### Developing Post-Meeting Strategies

PWLE have identified that engaging in the CC was emotionally taxing and, for some participants, left them seeking support to help process the meeting experiences. Given the sensitive nature of these meetings, one participant suggested that a group debrief could be carried out following the meeting to address potential harm, and that this approach may be beneficial for all participants of the meeting.

Another harmful thing I'd say is with the participants. There have been sometimes, the words that some of the participants used or expressions [that] feel judgmental, so

it is hard to hear when we're in those sessions. Although we know of course people like that are everywhere ... I do think it could be helpful to kind of have a reminder maybe those who are involved in the facilitation of each session, do a kinda like a wash where we wash up afterwards or a debrief. [To say], you know, there were one or two people that had these kinds of comments, here are a few ways, even though we all know them but just to remind you here are a few ways that you know you can help deal with some of the emotions. Just a little discussion or what have you ... even though clinicians and the support are always there.

While this participant highlighted the significant role debrief sessions have, embedding a similar structure within the meetings could work to eliminate some of the concerns that the participant shared.

Another consideration for developing post-meeting strategies is to create space between the sessions to facilitate program development reflection. Suggestions were made that additional time was required in between the CC for both PWLE, participants, and facilitators to reflect, reassess, and make format changes accordingly before moving forward to the next set of meetings.

Here's what I would've recommended in an ideal world ... we did the session on (date) in (name of city), we did two sessions on the (day of the week), I think it would [have]a been a better idea to have [one] then paused, reflected and then taken a week to review and change and then go back to start more sessions up.

In addition to having time to reflect and reassess for the purposes of program development, other participants suggested additional time between CC to simply process the heaviness of feelings expressed during the meetings.

I mean it is very deeply moving so I don't think you could do, definitely, not an eight-hour thing but I think what would be nice is to do what we do. The three-hour session that we have and have lunch and then they get an hour for lunch. They can kind of like percolate the stuff that we talked about and then in the afternoon we'd have to look into more, more active involvement.

Creating the space, or holding the space, for all participants to reflect on the course of the meetings ensures that the emotional needs are being built into the structure of the CC.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on innovative ways to engage PWLE of MST and the CAF that could create space to have CC around the well-being of current, past, and future CAF service members. The reflections presented provide the opportunity to understand and learn from the experiences of those PWLE who participated in at least one of the CC. The purpose of these meetings was to facilitate discussion, engage in mutual learning, and provide support for both the

survivor participants and the members of the CAF. This study found that participation in the meetings was overall a positive experience, though there were opportunities for growth. The results of this study can be used to inform the growing body of knowledge on the effect of innovative, trauma-informed, and survivor-centric approaches to support the recovery journey of those who have experienced sexual trauma and institutional betrayal.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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