

**Deborah Harrison**

**The First Casualty: Violence Against Women in Canadian Military Communities.**

James Lorimer & Co., 2002, 256 pp.

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Deborah Harrison airs the Canadian Armed Forces' (CF) dirty laundry in her book which condemns the military as a culture that covertly and overtly enables woman abuse while formally supporting a policy of zero tolerance. Clearly, gaps exist between policy and practice. Harrison's account of how the CF military environment enables woman abuse is based on interview data collected from over 100 abuse survivors, abusers, and other military personnel. Although it is no surprise that woman abuse remains a reality in the CF, how processes and structures that are designed to fight foreign enemies has unexpected casualties at home is eye opening. This book offers readers an opportunity to understand how the mission of the military can be translated into institutional structures and behaviors which can harm a portion of its members.

Woman abuse proliferates around the world. Much has been written about how patriarchal value systems and societal structures based on those values support male dominance of women, providing a breeding ground for abuse. Although research on military families in the United States is relatively plentiful, particularly related to the impact of a military life style, very little research has been conducted with CF families, particularly with regard to the issue of woman abuse. As a social institution that is male-dominated and predicated on the use of force, the military can be a particularly problematic environment for female victims of abuse and thus, makes a wonderful subject of study.

Harrison's book has three basic themes. The final chapters include recommendations and CF's response to the research findings. A key theme is that practices designed to enhance unit cohesion in order to sustain unit morale can also put female spouses at risk for abuse. For example, in the name of unit cohesion military members may close ranks around a woman abuser, isolate the victim, or label her as a troublemaker. These practices serve to enable the man to avoid taking responsibility for his abusive behavior and/or make it difficult for the woman to receive appropriate assistance. They also serve to maintain or even enhance potential power imbalances between male military members and their spouses.

Another theme is that CF military service provider systems tend to be inadequate to serve female victims. Part of this inadequacy is due to service providers' lack of training about the dynamics of woman abuse and what kinds of services are needed. In addition, Harrison asserts that, in order to sustain military readiness, the CF's service providing systems do not care equally for both military members and their spouses. Although the CF's stance is that they provide services to all family members equally, in practice several military service provider systems make serving the military member a clear priority, and they may do so by protecting abusive military members from being held accountable for their behavior or by censoring victims. Thus, despite the encouraging practices of some service providers, most view their primary duty is to the military member. In addition to these failings, Harrison also suggested that most military service providers fail to work as a team in providing assistance to an abused spouse.

A third theme is that as a culture of secrecy, the CF creates an environment where woman abuse can flourish. According to Harrison, official CF policy toward the social problems of military members is

one of hypervigilance. In practice, this policy seems to be understood as punishment, which has a strong silencing effect on military members and perhaps even their spouses. The code of secrecy even extends to peers' partners, thus abused wives are often deprived of receiving the support of other wives.

As a feminist scholar who has conducted numerous studies of spouse abuse, I found this book particularly interesting to read. Qualitative research is unmatched for its potential to explain complex processes and for putting a human face on phenomena that may otherwise be objectified. However, I have some concerns about the presentation of Harrison's data. To her credit, from the beginning Harrison states that she and her team approached this study as advocates as well as researchers. Although I have no concern about using a feminist lens to conduct such a study, throughout the book it was sometimes unclear what was research findings and what was Harrison's feminist editorial. The boundaries between the researcher's biases and the research findings were blurred on numerous occasions, thus jeopardizing the study's trustworthiness.

In addition, as a qualitative researcher I take precautions not to make statements that imply my findings are representative of the larger population under study. On numerous occasions I found myself questioning statements that inappropriately implied the study used a representative sample of military personnel. For example, in one chapter Harrison states that for every service provider who helps an abused spouse there are other personnel who support the abusive military member instead. There is no way that the study Harrison conducted could come to this conclusion. Statements like this also mar the trustworthiness of Harrison's findings. Is she exaggerating her findings to make her point? In addition, on numerous occasions I found that interpretations made were not borne out by the quotes from participants provided to serve as illustration; again casting doubts on the findings presented.

All in all, Harrison's book makes an important contribution to the field of woman abuse by shedding light on how the CF social context influences woman abuse. However, the book would have a much more powerful impact without the breaches discussed above and requires a critical read.

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