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SECURITY SOLUTIONS, WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS

— Jody Thomas

This op-ed did not come easily to me. You may wonder why. We are not short of “women’s contributions” to share on the security-solutions front. Quite the contrary.

Let’s start with policy. When more women are involved in peace and security efforts, peace processes are more likely to succeed. That’s why Canada is working to empower women in all aspects of peace and security, including increasing the number of women deployed overseas.

Knowing the operational and cultural value that women bring to our forces, Canada also launched the second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. The Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are major partners in the plan, which prioritizes women’s involvement in all of Canada’s military activities. The plan’s objectives are to increase gender equality and the leadership role of women and girls in all stages of conflict resolution, and to protect their human rights throughout.

This past summer, Canada became Chair of the Women, Peace and Security Chiefs of Defence Network. While acting as Chair, Canada will grow this network. We will also enhance understanding and acceptance of increasing gender capacity by delivering training material, Chiefs of Defence-level information-sharing meetings, and by sharing practical tools such as the aide-mémoire: *Integrating Gender Perspectives in Operations*.

When we move beyond policy and into leadership, Canada has much to contribute as well. In the CAF, the number of women in senior roles has almost

doubled since 2015, with influence extending deep into our allied nations. For example, Lieutenant-General Christine Whitecross is the Commandant at the NATO Defence College in Rome, a hub of learning for the future leaders of the NATO alliance. Commodore Josée Kurtz became the first woman to be appointed Commander of a Standing NATO Maritime Group. Major-General Jennie Carignan will shortly assume command of the NATO Mission Iraq.

Here at home, the CAF’s Judge Advocate General is a woman. Our Deputy Vice Chief of the Defence Staff is a woman. Four of our Assistant Deputy Ministers at DND are women. Outside of DND and the CAF, Canada’s National Security and Intelligence Advisor is a woman, as is our Deputy Clerk of the Privy Council and our Deputy Minister of Global Affairs Canada. I could go on. In Canada, women are at the table. More than that—in many cases, women are at the head of the table. Every one of us is deeply competent and have earned our spot—not because of our gender, not because of tokenism, but because we ignored all suggestions that we didn’t belong, and just got on with doing our jobs.

Drilling down further, Canada is a leader amongst our allies in terms of the proportion of women in our military. The CAF has no gender barriers to entry for any occupations or environments, and candidates are selected for training, promotions, postings, and career opportunities based on rank, qualifications, and merit. The overall number of women in our forces currently sits at almost 15.8 percent—with no limitations as to where they can serve or in what roles—with an aspiration of reaching 25 percent by 2026.

So when I say that this op-ed did not come easily to me, the reason is not a lack of material. Rather, it was because I am reluctant to highlight women's contributions as separate and distinct from larger global efforts to bring peace and security, and support the rules-based international order.

To do so, however well-intentioned, is to reinforce to the next generation that somehow women should continue to be the exception, and not the norm.

We need to move beyond that perception.

To be clear, celebrating women's "firsts" in the defence and security sphere is a good thing. Trailblazers ought to be recognized, both for what they've achieved in overcoming barriers, and for the inspiration they provide those who have previously been excluded—either by cultural or institutional bias—from positions of authority or influence.

But women who contribute in the defence and security environment are not all or nothing—powerful or absent. And that, I think, is what is missing from our discourse. Women are here. At all ages, all experience levels, and at all ranks. We are drafting policy. We are working on ships. We are

representing industry, repairing vehicles, acting as spokespersons. We are communicating strategically, leading teams, controlling remotely piloted aircraft. We are training the next generation of soldiers, sailors, and aircrew.

We are not rare, shiny objects. We are here because we belong here. Regardless of whether we balance work and home. Regardless of whether someone thinks we do or do not adhere to stereotypes of women's roles and definitions of femininity. The defence and security sphere shouldn't need to reach a critical mass of women before that fact is recognized.

My aspiration for the Canadian defence and security environment, and, by extension, the global defence and security environment, is that any woman—at any stage of her career—is accepted as part of the normal process of advancing peace and security. Once that message resonates, that's when we'll truly be recognizing women's contributions to security solutions.

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