

Leadership and Promotional Challenges for Women in the RCMP

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Introduction

North American policing has traditionally been a male domain, with men holding the majority of positions at all ranks in policing agencies. However, recent decades have witnessed a steady rise in the number of women in these organizations. Despite advancements, female police officers encounter systemic barriers to career progression, particularly in promotion and leadership, including those in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Conor et al., 2020). For many, the RCMP uniform is not just a badge of service but a shield from unwritten difficulties that continue to exist within the organization. Beneath the facade of progress lies a complex reality characterized by cultural resistance, structural inequalities, and capricious policy implementation, all of which quietly influence their advancement and professional success. This research investigates the central question: "What are the key promotional and leadership barriers that continue to hinder women's career advancement within the RCMP since 2013, despite the implementation of gender equality policies and initiatives?" The purpose of this study is to examine these ongoing promotional and leadership obstacles in the RCMP to determine why current policies have failed to establish equitable opportunities for women and to provide concrete recommendations for promoting a more inclusive organizational culture.

Background

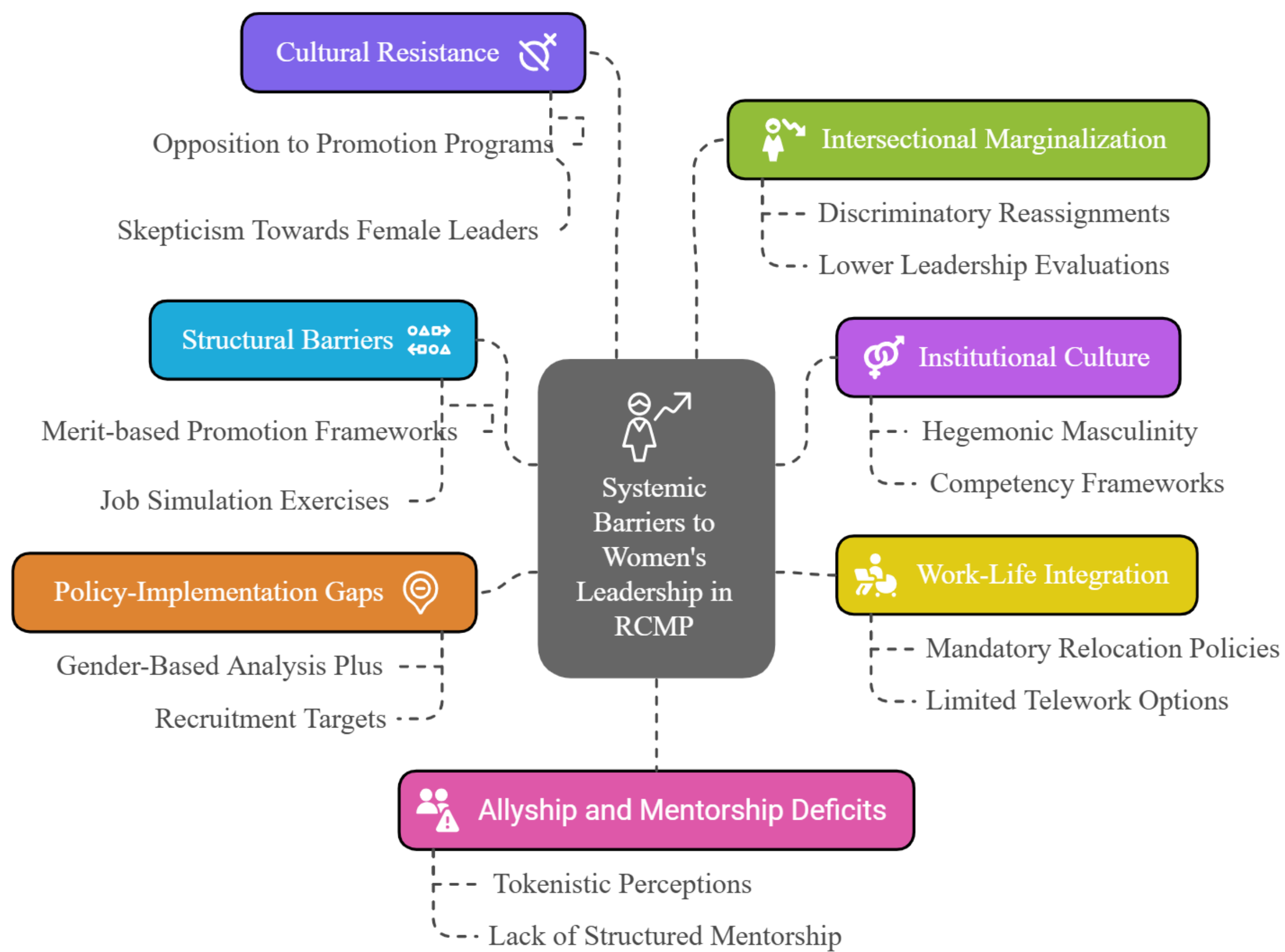
Women were first admitted to the RCMP on September 16, 1974, when 32 pioneering women formed "Troop 17," marking a watershed moment for gender diversity in Canadian law enforcement. Despite this milestone, the journey toward gender equality within the RCMP has been fraught with challenges, as evidenced by extensive documentation of systemic discrimination spanning decades. By 2014, women represented 21% of RCMP officers, with the organization setting an ambitious goal to increase this representation to 30% by 2025. Multiple class action lawsuits highlighted the pervasiveness of gender-based harassment, culminating in the landmark Merlo/Davidson settlement in 2017, which provided \$125 million in compensation to 2,300 women for workplace misconduct. In response to mounting criticism, RCMP Commissioner Bob Paulson issued a formal apology in 2013 and implemented the "Gender and Respect" action plan, containing 37 recommendations to address harassment. Despite these initiatives, a 2016 review questioned why, after more than 15 reviews and over 200 recommendations, "a culture of harassment remained entrenched within the force". This research examines how these persistent barriers affect women in the RCMP, focusing particularly on the post-2013 period when gender equality policies were ostensibly strengthened but failed to create truly equitable opportunities for leadership advancement (RCMP, 2024)

Methods

This research employed a transformative worldview and qualitative secondary methodology to examine barriers to women's career advancement in the RCMP. A systematic literature review was conducted using keywords such as "women in policing," "gender equality in law enforcement," and "RCMP gender equity policies." Sources were gathered from JIBC Library Databases, Google Scholar, and RCMP publications. From over 650 initial articles, results were filtered to peer-reviewed publications (2013-2025) with clear relevance to Canadian policing contexts. Studies were included if they addressed systemic barriers in law enforcement and excluded if solely historical or lacking relevance to Canada. This approach yielded 15 articles for review, with 10 ultimately selected for in-depth analysis based on their strong empirical focus. Ethical integrity was maintained throughout, with particular attention to respectful handling of case studies and personal testimonies. Potential institutional bias in RCMP reports was addressed through cross-examination of multiple sources to distinguish between organizational rhetoric and actual progress.

Results

Women in the RCMP face persistent barriers, including biased promotion systems, exclusionary networks, and work-life conflicts. Despite policies like GBA+, inconsistent implementation has limited progress in leadership equity (Reil, 2019). Moreover, the following chart depicts this research's key findings:



Discussion

Women in the RCMP face persistent leadership barriers rooted in structural inequities and cultural resistance. The study's systematic literature review effectively synthesized qualitative insights with quantitative data, revealing how hegemonic masculinity maintains exclusionary networks that limit women's career advancement. Policy implementation gaps reflect ritualistic compliance rather than cultural integration, with GBA+ often reduced to a bureaucratic exercise instead of driving systemic change. Work-life integration challenges disproportionately affect women, with 40% declining promotions due to caregiving responsibilities compared to 12% of men (Pamminger, 2022). The research highlights how tokenistic mentorship and performative allyship sustain rather than challenge systemic barriers. Research limitations include geographic constraints and reliance on qualitative over longitudinal data, suggesting future studies should employ mixed methods, disaggregate data intersectionally, and incorporate international practices.

Conclusions or Recommendations

Despite post-2013 gender equality policies, women in the RCMP still face barriers like biased promotions, work-life conflicts, and harassment. GBA+ policies exist but lack accountability, limiting their impact, especially for Indigenous and racialized women. As a 24-year-old female law enforcement student, there is a strong commitment to advocating for a law enforcement system that ensures equal opportunities for women. Future research should track long-term career outcomes, study international gender equity initiatives, and examine male officers' views on allyship. The RCMP must improve promotion transparency, expand mentorship, engage male allies, and implement flexible mobility policies. Lessons from Canada's peacekeeping efforts can inform reforms, ensuring an inclusive leadership culture (Reil, 2019).

References

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