

Navigating Intersecting Identities: Role Negotiations of Military Spouses During Deployment in the Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersecting identities and role negotiations navigated by military spouses during deployment and prolonged separation, focusing on the Indian context. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study delves into the nuanced experiences of military spouses, aiming to understand how deployment affects their roles and identities. Specific objectives include exploring intersecting identities and role negotiations, and analysing their implications for the spouses. The study comprised a sample size of 8 people, the inclusion criteria specifying that they were civilian wives of Indian National Defense military officers. Data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Key findings of the study reflected the influence of traditional gender roles and cultural norms on spousal dynamics and role negotiations.

Keywords: *Military Spouses, Deployment, Intersecting Identities, Role Negotiations, Indian Context*

The deployment of military personnel is a defining aspect of service in the Indian armed forces, necessitating significant sacrifice and resilience from both service members and their families. While much attention has been given to the experiences of deployed service members themselves, the impact on their spouses, particularly within the Indian context, remains relatively underexplored. Military spouses face unique challenges during periods of deployment, including prolonged separations and uncertainty about their partner's safety and return. These challenges not only affect their emotional well-being but also necessitate complex negotiations of roles and identities within the family unit.

Deployment within military families is widely recognized as a stressor that profoundly affects both the deployed service member and their family, with spouses often bearing a significant burden (Knapp & Newman, 1993). Research on military spouses has highlighted the intricate negotiations of identities and roles they undergo during deployment. Military spouses often navigate multiple identities, balancing their personal roles, family responsibilities, and the expectations of the military community. Studies emphasize the dynamic nature of these role negotiations, which extend beyond traditional marital roles to include managing household responsibilities, providing emotional support, and maintaining social networks (Misra, 2019).

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The deployment context adds layers of complexity to these negotiations, as military spouses must cope with the absence of their partners while managing daily life and maintaining familial stability (Schumm et al., 1996). This period of separation often prompts spouses to reevaluate their own identities and redefine their roles within the family structure (Misra, 2022). The intersection of military life with personal identity and familial responsibilities highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of how military spouses navigate these challenges and adapt to changing circumstances.

Despite the extensive literature on military deployments, there remains a notable gap in understanding the experiences of Indian military spouses facing deployment-related challenges. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the intersecting identities and role negotiations of Indian military spouses during deployment. By delving into the emotional experiences of role adaptations, this research aims to contribute to the well-being of military families, inform support interventions, and enrich the broader discourse on military psychology within the Indian context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Objectives

To explore the impact of navigating the intersecting identities and role negotiations that come with partner deployment.

Concepts and Dimensions

- **Spousal Deployment.** It involves the period that service members are stationed in field areas away from home. This leads to the exposure of the family and civilian spouse to prolonged separation from the military member of the family.
- **Intersecting Identities.** In the context of this study, this refers to how military spouses navigate their intersecting personal, social, and cultural identities and role negotiations within a military cultural context during deployments.

Participants

The size of the sample was 8 participants. Sampling was done until the data saturation point was achieved. As theoretical saturation was achieved, the sampling process also reached its saturation. The sample comprised women of Indian nationality who are married to officers (rank up to colonels) across all military services and have experienced at least one spousal deployment.

Purposive sampling was done for the data collection procedure which was stopped when no new emergent themes were found. Individuals were selected on the pretext that they were married to a member of the military and had experienced at least one spousal deployment before.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Women who are a civilian of Indian nationality
- Are married to an officer in any Indian National Defense military service
- Have undergone at least one spousal deployment (of minimum 3 months)

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Data Collection

The sample was achieved through purposive sampling and snowballing, after which they were assessed based on the inclusion criteria. A consent form addressing the requirements of the participant and the commitment to the research was circulated to the selected participants. The data collection was done using a semi-structured interview format comprising of open-ended questions enabling the participants to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences and allowing the researcher to ask further questions based on the description given by the participant. Member checking was done for all follow-up questions and clarifications. The location for the interviews was either a comfortable setting for the participants or through online platform. The interviews were audio recorded, which were then transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the primary methodological approach, given the exploratory nature of the research design. It facilitated the exploration of patterns and themes within the data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Indian military spouses during deployment and separation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings for this study were developed as a result of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process and reflect the focus of phenomenology, which is the lived experience and meaning of a particular phenomenon—in this case, the phenomenon of experiencing deployments. The results section also reflects the “double hermeneutic” of the IPA approach, such that the findings convey the researcher’s interpretation of the participants’ interpretation of their experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Table 1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Navigating Intersecting Identities and Role Negotiations

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Intersection of self-identity with military spouse identity	a. Distress caused while Balancing Personal Goals with Military Obligations b. Keeping up with the military life as you grow older c. Learning Cultural Norms and Decorum in the Military Setup d. Sacrificial role of the wife
2. Navigating Interpersonal and Family Dynamics	a. Difficulties in cultural integration for introverted wives b. Experiences with infidelity c. Single Parenting d. Limited Emotional Availability of Spouse e. The emotional toll of limited communication opportunities f. Struggles with Emotional Expression g. Increased extraversion

Here, the complex dynamics of military spouses' identities and roles within the military context were explored. It sheds light on the challenges wives face while balancing personal

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aspirations with military obligations, adapting to cultural norms, and coping with the sacrifices inherent in their role.

1. Intersection of self-identity with military spouse identity

This theme explores how military spouses negotiate their sense of self amidst the expectations, obligations, and norms associated with their partner's military service. By delving into the intersection of personal identity with military spouse identity, we gain insights into the unique experiences, struggles, and resilience of individuals within this dynamic and ever-evolving social context.

a. Distress caused while Balancing Personal Goals with Military Obligations.

Military wives were often found to experience significant distress in their struggle to reconcile personal aspirations with the demanding obligations of military life.

"Managing all of that on your own along with the workfront, is very, very challenging and very, very difficult, even emotionally, a lot of times. One is so drained with all such kinds of things happening around..." (Pt.3).

This highlights the emotional turmoil wives faced while navigating the intricate balance between personal and military responsibilities.

b. Keeping up with the Military Life as you Grow Older. Aging was found to pose challenges for military spouses, impacting their ability to keep pace with the dynamic nature of military life. The physical and emotional strains experienced by spouses as they age within the military lifestyle were found to cause distress and concern regarding their roles as military wives.

"But as I'm aging, like now, especially this time, when I'm going through menopause and all that, I find it extremely difficult. My body is not supporting me in the regular transfers I'm not able to do with that kind of- maybe it's a passing phase- but I don't have that kind of energy anymore." (Pt.5)

c. Learning Cultural Norms and Decorum in the Military Setup. Adapting to the stringent discipline and protocols of military life was found to require significant adjustment for spouses. Participants expressed the challenges they faced in assimilating into the military culture and adhering to its norms and decorum.

"I had to actually train myself to be disciplined... So lots to learn from there, what to do, how to behave, how to sit, how to walk, how to talk, so all of that took some time for me to adapt" (Pt.3).

Moreover, participants recounted their experiences of being introduced to the intricacies of military etiquette, which created the pressure wives faced to conform to established social norms and protocols within military circles.

"After I got married, I realized that defense forces, you know, there is a decorum. So I, uh, as soon as I got married, I was gifted this book called 'Welcome Women' which gives all the details about how to host a party, what glasses to use, what cutlery to use, how to have a sit down formal dinner, how to behave in a party and I was like oh my God. So I was expected to learn all of that." (Pt.1)

d. Sacrificial role of the wife. Military wives were found to often make sacrifices in personal and professional domains to accommodate their partner's work and military obligations. Participants reported numerous instances of making sacrifices at the expense of personal ambitions in order to support their partner's military career.

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"So, this was one regret. I never could hold a job throughout because you had to make a compromise between moving then." (Pt.5)

2. *Navigating Interpersonal and Family Dynamics*

During analysis, several challenges that military wives encounter in managing relationships and family dynamics within the military environment were examined. This theme explores difficulties in cultural integration, experiences with infidelity, single parenting, emotional dynamics, limited spousal availability, and increased extraversion.

- a. **Difficulties in Cultural Integration for Introverted Wives.** It was found that some participants encountered significant challenges in adapting to the social norms and expectations prevalent within military communities. Specifically, introverted wives were found to struggle with the demands of social interaction within the close-knit military environment.

"I am not very social, and in the quarters, they have parties and gossip and all that. So, life there is just not for me...I told you I have a lot of trust issues, so I don't trust a person easily. So, it was better for me to be alone than speak to four people or two people that are strangers. So, I somehow adjusted" (Pt.4).

This excerpt details the challenge experienced by introverted wives who struggle to engage in social gatherings and forge connections with fellow military families due to their inherent disposition.

- b. **Experiences with infidelity.** Infidelity within military contexts was also found to impact marital dynamics significantly. Wives were found to experience emotional turmoil in the aftermath of infidelity, especially due to the complexities they faced in grappling with feelings of betrayal, hurt, and mistrust.

"I had a very good friend, our husbands were deployed together, who got into an extramarital affair, and I had to sign as a witness. And, of course, it impacts me also, it impacts my marriage too, right?" (Pt.5).

This excerpt further highlights the proximity in which infidelity can occur within military circles. Due to their tight-knit nature, it was found to have profound ripple effects on individuals directly and indirectly involved.

- c. **Single Parenting.** Managing familial responsibilities alone during deployments was found to present a significant challenge for military spouses, especially in fulfilling parental roles alone during deployments.

"Once the kids come into your lives, that is when that responsibility factor hits you. And that is when it becomes a little more challenging, a little more difficult... it is very, very challenging and very, very difficult and even emotionally a lot of times you feel so drained." (Pt.3)

The heightened sense of responsibility and the overwhelming nature of parental duties alongside other obligations in the absence of their partner were found to cause distress in wives. Moreover, participants highlighted the emotional turmoil experienced by both themselves and their children during deployments. It was found to further aggravate the emotional strain of fulfilling parental responsibilities alone.

"I mean, the kids have their own emotional turmoil and you really don't know how to handle both the fronts...So it becomes very difficult to handle kids as they grow up as well". (Pt. 8).

- d. **Limited Emotional Availability of Spouse.** Wives were found to face challenges due to the emotional unavailability and limitations in communication that come with the deployment of their spouses. It was found to cause frustrations that wives experienced due to partners' minimal emotional expression and/or communication

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during deployments due to the nature of their work. It caused emotional strain to be experienced by wives who seek connection and support from their deployed partners but encounter barriers to meaningful communication.

"Like, my husband talks very, very less, so fishing information out of him, of any nature, is very, very difficult. It's quite frustrating you know, to be left in the dark all the time and find things out always at the last minute." (Pt.2).

- e. **The Emotional Toll of Limited Communication Opportunities.** Participants shared anecdotes detailing the anxiety and apprehension they experienced when communication with their partners was disrupted.

"We would be out of touch completely because at sea there would be no network. So that situation was a, you know, a kind of situation where one would feel anxious" (Pt.1).

The lack of communication opportunities was found to cause heightened emotional vulnerability experienced by the wives during periods of no communication with the deployed spouse.

- f. **Struggles with Emotional Expression.** Military wives encountered difficulties in expressing emotions and vulnerability within their relationship. It was found that they faced hurdles in articulating their feelings and embracing vulnerability within their relationships.

"And yes, when he used to visit, I wouldn't open up to him so frequently. I didn't want to breakdown in front of him because as it is, he's having so many problems and again after one or two days he's going to go back." (Pt.4)

The demands of defense work contributed to this reluctance among spouses to fully disclose their emotions to their partners. Hence, an environment conducive to emotional openness during brief reunions with their partners was notably lacking.

- g. **Increased extraversion.** Deployment experiences were found to often cause increased sociability and openness among military spouses. Participants noted a shift towards greater social engagement and a willingness to forge new connections, attributing this change to the necessity of adapting to frequent relocations and the cohesive camaraderie within the military community.

"I became socially much more active after I got married to him. Prior to that also I was quite social but not as social as I am now" (Pt.3).

This increased extraversion is not merely a personal trait but a response to the unique demands of military life, where establishing connections and building support networks become essential elements in navigating the challenges of constant relocation and fostering resilience within the family unit.

CONCLUSION

The study explores the complex dynamics of military spouses' identities and roles within the Indian military context. It highlights the challenges wives face while balancing personal aspirations with military obligations, adapting to cultural norms, and coping with inherent sacrifices. Military spouses negotiate their sense of self amidst the expectations, obligations, and norms associated with their partner's military service. The study sheds light on the significant distress experienced by military wives as they reconcile personal goals with military obligations. Aging poses challenges for military spouses, impacting their ability to keep pace with the dynamic nature of military life. Adapting to the stringent discipline and protocols of military life requires significant adjustment for spouses. Military wives often make sacrifices in personal and professional domains to accommodate their partner's military obligations. The study examines difficulties in cultural integration, especially for

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introverted wives, and the emotional impact of infidelity within military contexts. Managing familial responsibilities alone during deployments presents significant challenges for military spouses. Limited emotional availability and communication during deployments cause frustration and emotional strain for wives. The study finds increased extraversion and sociability among military spouses as a response to the unique demands of military life. The research provides insights into the multifaceted challenges, emotional experiences, and coping mechanisms of Indian military spouses, contributing to a broader understanding of their resilience and adaptability.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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