

Intersectional Identities of Military Mothers

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of motherhood and military service creates a unique and complex identity for women who balance these dual roles. Historically marginalised, military mothers face challenges that include societal expectations of femininity and the demands of combat readiness. Their identities as women, service members, and mothers intersect in ways that often lead to role conflicts, social isolation, and limited support. While strides have been made to integrate women into the military, policies and perceptions still lag in fully accommodating the needs of military mothers. This paper explores the historical background, current status, and psychosocial implications of being a military mother, advocating for further research and more inclusive policies to support their diverse needs.

Keywords: *Military Mothers, Intersectional Identities, Gender Stereotyping, Group Cohesion, Role Conflict, Symbolic Interactionism*

Every individual in this world possesses more than a singular identity. To exist in this multifaceted world with only one identity is almost impossible. Identities can originate from different aspects of our lives such as personal and social relationships, occupation and so on and shape our self concept. Military mothers are one such example. Apart from the various relational, regional and other identities that they possess, three central identities that intersect here are “woman”, “army woman or service woman” and “mother”. While these identities may be born out of and shaped by different experiences and parts of one’s life, they all overlap and intersect. In fact, having multiple, intersecting roles make human identities complex but intrinsically rich.

Origin and History of the Intersecting Identities

Historically, women have always been placed at the periphery of military combat and central operations due to, primarily, their gender. During the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) for example, women served in the army in traditional, stereotypical roles of nurses, seamstresses and cooks. Women took on more nontraditional roles during the Civil War (1861-1865) when they served as spies or smugglers. Over the years, women were slowly getting integrated to the military sector in different capacities. However, none of these were related to actual combat positions. During World War II (1939-1945), a total of 350,000 women served in the United States Armed Forces. During the 1980s and 1990s, women were integrated into the regular army in the US, leading to breakdown of gender barriers.

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The following years also witnessed the increase in humanitarian crises around the world which required army interventions, a cause for which service women were deemed suitable.

In India, the role of women in the Indian Armed Forces became significant with the development of the Indian Military Nursing Service in 1888. They played an active but non-combative nursing role during the first World War. The non-combative role of women in the army was further expanded through the birth of the Women's Auxiliary Corps. Women also served as spies during the second World War and the formation of the Azad hind Fauj saw women in combative roles for the first time in India. Over the 80s and 90s, women were made eligible for short service commissions in the Indian Army.

Mothers have, since the Revolutionary War, volunteered to contribute to the army's efforts through traditional roles. Since 2015, mothers have also held frontline combat roles in the US army. In 2018, 16.5% of active-duty personnel were women. 10% of all military veterans today are women, a percentage that is likely to increase manifold in the future. Women veterans have multifaceted roles, including that of mothers, but their contributions have often gone unrecognised (Ward, 2021).

Current Status

The US Army started using Combat Support Teams (CST) and Female Engagement Teams (FET) in Afghanistan in 2010. These teams' main responsibility was to interact with female communities in ways that male service members were unable to. In 2013 and 2018, women officially became eligible for combat positions in the American army and close combat ground roles in the UK army, respectively (Biswas, 2020).

However, India has a long way to go. In 2020, despite the Supreme court's requests to allow women in combat roles in the military, the Indian government responded stating that women are not fit for the same. Motherhood and childcare were primarily blamed for the same. Maternity leave that service women would at some point require, was viewed as a "problem" (Biswas, 2020).

In such a scenario, while women have struggled for ages to find a place for themselves in the army to serve their country selflessly, their identification to their womanhood and motherhood has been disregarded by the Indian government. For armies which are more accepting of mothers, supportive policies and resources are lacking (Kelley et al., 2001; Walsh, 2016).

Contemporary Concerns and Psycho-social Implications

The main concerns that military mothers have to endure due to their intersectional identities include *group cohesion problems, gender stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and marginalisation*, to name a few.

Group cohesion of a military unit is of utmost importance to ensure efficient functioning. The identity of female service personnel, especially those who are mothers, is seen as a threat to this cohesion of military groups. The Indian government believes that male soldiers, especially those belonging to a rural background, have not been trained to accept women commanding officers. This is ironic as military forces are known to be trained to be flexible with their outlooks and perceptions to help them mould themselves to any situation (Biswas, 2020). Evidence on the contrary has been found. The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found no concluding evidence that cohesion cannot be fostered in mixed gender

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units. *Social tolerance and acceptance*, primary ingredients for social cohesion, were seen to be cultivable under *good leadership* (Cook & Weiss, 2016).

Gender stereotyping in the military is seen in various contexts. In the Indian army, women have held every possible role except the combative. Researchers believe that gender norms influence the Indian army, with a prominent male dominance and structural exclusion of women. *Patriarchal beliefs* are ingrained in the top brass of the government and army. Womanhood and motherhood are seen as inconveniences as women are viewed as weak and needing protection (Biswas, 2020). On the other hand, men are viewed as being suited better to army roles due to their *stereotypic aggression and physical strength*.

The perception of women as calm, devoted mothers has historically prevented women from serving in the armed forces or engaging in battle. Women who have fought in battle, under cover, or during emergencies have had their contributions to these situations undervalued in an effort to lessen the impact on *gender dynamics*. In recent times, there has been a greater deployment of military forces on peacekeeping missions, which has raised awareness of the attributes that women are purported to possess. For the same reasons that they dismissed women in the past, the military of the future prefer women (DeGroot, 2019).

In 2012, a picture released in a mothers' support forum online of two servicewomen breastfeeding in their uniform led to outrage. This is attributed to the fact that the US hegemony status is associated with stereotypical masculine traits, an idea perpetuated by uniforms that both army men and women don which camouflages femininity. This reflects and protects *societal norms* regarding men as protectors and decision-makers. The idea of breastfeeding in uniform is hence viewed as subversive and rebellious. Visible, physical femininity, such as breasts, in contrast to uniforms, highlights the gap between femininity and the masculine military existence (McFarlane, 2014; Van Gilder, 2019). Therefore, an individual's *identity* of being a mother is rejected in the army, while that of being a woman is repressed. That is, the way mothers *present themselves for an audience* is not encouraged by the military. *Symbolic interactionism* can also be used as a theory to explain this incident. Symbols have meanings that shape social identities and perceptions. For example, the military is a symbol of US superpower status. When the mothers breastfeeding in the uniform tried to negotiate the meaning of the military uniform to make it more inclusive, the bid was shunned. Personal identity construction and how much of it is socially displayed by military mothers therefore becomes a result of feedback from society (Aksan et al., 2009).

The military's shrouded intolerance of motherhood leads to army women feeling torn between their roles of being a service worker and a mother. This highlights the difficulty of maintaining *dual identities*. They feel they cannot do both and cannot afford to get pregnant while they are in their army role (Taber, 2013). For example, between 2003 and 2013, almost 100 female British soldiers serving on the frontline at Afghanistan were sent home when they were found out to be pregnant (Crossley, 2014). It is viewed as one's own responsibility to adapt to military rules that do not accommodate mothers in the military. Post giving birth, many women also join back in non-combative roles, the only section of service that lets women's dual identities co-exist (Taber, 2013). Due to societal norms and expectations attached to motherhood, many times the mothering role takes precedence. An operational role which leaves no space or time for family is let go in favour of a non-operation role which is usually feminised and gives a semblance of "balance" between the two intersecting yet conflicting roles. Motherhood may affect one's service woman identity or vice versa (Taber, 2013). This is supported by research which found that mothers

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construct their *worker-parent identity* by both altering work status to fulfil societal demands as well as reconciling said demands in a way that suits their work choices (Johnston & Swanson, 2006).

In order to succeed in the military setting, women exhibit more masculine tendencies while also losing some of their femininity. According to Israeli studies, women feel compelled to take on masculine traits in order to demonstrate their military prowess (Cheng, 2022). This can be connected to the *ingroup-outgroup phenomena*. Women on paper are a part of the military community (ingroup) but will be considered a part of the “other” if they do not try and fit in with their group members (displaying masculine and downplaying feminine traits). Therefore, military mothers construct their social identity based on their membership to the army group. They categorise themselves into the military group, adopt the masculine identity of the group and may even compare their group to other social groups such as civilian mothers. In return, they get a sense of belonging, purpose and self-worth. This process is a part of the *Social Identity Theory* (McLeod, 2023).

Role conflict is a problem that many military mothers face. While mothers are expected to be nurturing and gentle, service members are expected to be tough physically and emotionally. These dual identities held by women in the army bring along with it emotional turmoil and *role confusion* (Barnes et al., 2016). Military mothers in particular face higher levels of parental role conflicts, which are primarily brought on by worries about childcare, protracted separations, and the compatibility of military and spouse duties (Kelty & Segal, 2013; Taber, 2011). Throughout deployment cycles, mothers also report feeling anxious about being apart from their children.

Maternal identity is not something that is added to an individual’s pre-existing identity; it is a *restructuring* of their existing identity to accommodate motherhood. It is a process of *self socialisation*. Maternal identity serves as the starting point and the culmination of an active process that lasts from 12 to 15 months during pregnancy to three trimesters after delivery. This process involves realising one's position as a mother and becoming attached to the foetus and newborn. The capacity of a woman to envision herself as a mother during her pregnancy is linked to her acceptance of the maternal role after giving birth. More significantly, the capacity to imagine oneself as a mother during pregnancy is associated with maternal flexibility and responsiveness to the child. The *attachment relationship* is essential to promote *social stimulation* of the infant. Furthermore, support systems in the environment improve maternal role attainment. The family provides additional assistance by adjusting boundaries to make room for a new member and duties. Greater conflict with maternal adaptation may result from the family's incapacity to adjust to the shifting roles of its members, which may have an effect on the woman's *role identification* process (Weis, 2006). Maternal role attainment also requires *social learning* from a role model who can serve as an example of ideal mothering. However, the typical development of a maternal role is hindered for military mothers who are on active duty. Military mothers’ unique intersectional experiences make them feel more *isolated socially* as well, which is worsened by continual *role integration and reintegration, shifts and confusion*.

The *Healthy Soldier Effect* is also observed in the military. A study by Davy et al., (2015) conducted with Australian service women found that they do not seem to be more likely to experience psychological or physical problems following deployment. One argument is that they may already have the skills and support networks in place to deal with the difficulties of juggling work and family obligations because they are working mothers. A more plausible

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scenario is the healthy soldier effect, which implies that those who feel that it is difficult to balance their obligations to their families and their military service may be more inclined to leave the military.

Future of Military Mothers

While motherhood is more widely accepted in the military at present, there is still a long way to go for the intersectionality of their identities to be fully integrated and celebrated. Stress results from parents feeling compelled to take on more tasks right after deployment ends, even in cases where a primary carer is still present. Furthermore, when people assume that *reintegration* would be simple, mothers become frustrated. It can be difficult to juggle multiple responsibilities without support, especially when problems like long-term separations and relocations still exist. Deployed mothers preserve their relationships with their children through multiple military programs but still face a number of obstacles, such as inadequate support networks and stigma associated with seeking behavioural health care. It is crucial to conduct research on the immediate and long-term effects of deployment on female veterans and military members, as well as on solutions tailored to meet their specific requirements (Walsh & Nieves, 2018).

Mothers put forth a lot of effort to look after their family during the deployment cycle, but they frequently overlook their own needs for care and support. Self-care and a sustainable work-family balance are key areas that the military can intervene and support service women who are mothers. Deployed mothers frequently struggle with *isolation*, signifying the importance of forming relationships with people who have gone through similar things. With the help of group-based programmes, military moms can reestablish connections with their families after deployment, foster a sense of community, and exchange experiences. The isolation of spouses can be addressed through group assistance for military mothers and their families (Walsh, 2017).

Figure 1 Military mothers breastfeeding their babies



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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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