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**Women in the armed forces globally
and in-context of Armenia (an
emerging democracy)**

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Abstract

Following Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's speech at the presentation of the Government Action Plan at the National Assembly on the 24th of August 2021 (Pashinyan, 2021), the Republic of Armenia has started to implement the inclusion of women in the armed forces (Mgdesyan, 2023). This was proposed through a voluntary militia unit (Mejlumyan, 2020) that has since become a draft law which was a part of reforms to the military after the Artsakh 2020 war that unveiled Armenia's ineffective military that since has been heavily critiqued (Azadian, 2023; Dermoyan, 2023).

Historically, Armenia has implemented a mandatory 2 year conscription scheme with men however this has expanded to allow women 18-27 to join a voluntary military service for 6 months. Therefore, with the new push by Pashinyan's government to encourage the "involvement of women in combat units" (Pashinyan, 2021) we must consider feminist perceptions of female militarisation, particularly in Armenia's traditional gender norms extending beyond domestic spheres into the state sphere. While the participation of women in a male-dominated domain can be argued to contribute toward gender equality by breaking socialised gender norms, feminist scholars must consider the well-documented phenomenon that sexual violence is more likely in areas of conflict-affected settings (OECD, 2019). This coincides with many scholars rejecting the army and military systems in general due to the psychological consequences endured after their service, additionally, there are reportings of military peer homicides, physical violence, bullying and humiliation tactics used to haze newcomers into the military systems (Figley and Russell, 2021). Countries with massive military programs such as the UK, Canada, and America indicate sexual assaults and violence as a persistent behaviour endemic to the armed forces (Morgan, 2022; Natelson, 2009; Gilmore, 2019) therefore we can estimate that within Armenian military environments, sexual violence against women may increase. In 2022 the U.S. military has seen an increase in sexual assault reports by 13% (CBS News, 2022), despite significant differences in Armenia and the U.S. military bodies, we can make a preliminary comparison that global violence against female military officials is on the rise.

This essay will attempt to critically evaluate the injunction between gender equality and the risk of sexual violence as Armenia moves forward in its military reforms. Initially, the essay shall focus on the history of patriarchy in Armenia and what gender norms mean in terms of armed conflict in relation to the Protector/Protected roles often used in militarised contexts (Young, 2003). Then an in-depth analysis of the new proposed reforms including the organised shooting courses. Then a look into the experience of women in the Armenian military and how their experience compares with other nations. Subsequently, an analysis must also be made into how the participation of women in traditionally male roles, helps promote gender equality through the breaking (or redefining) of the aforementioned gender roles and whether this is a sign of emerging equality in Armenia. Finally, it shall look at the precedents of the voluntary militia unit and whether the Armenian Ministry of Defence is considering the worries of violence against women.

Introduction

Globally, 13% of defence ministers are women (Wittenberg-Cox, 2020). This indicates that the historically male industry is increasingly becoming more gender-representative, however, as more women join armed forces questions surrounding feminist thought start to arise. Concerns such as how women are treated in a male dominated industry, whether or not the participation of said women is meaningful and impactful, whether women are safe in the armed forces. All of these worries amount to a deep feminist debate over whether or not encouraging women to join the armed forces is beneficial to gender equality.

This essay attempts to consider the consequences of Armenia opening the armed forces to women, it does not intend to create an opinion on the debate but rather acknowledge the context of the discussion, including some brief recommendations on how to avoid negative consequences of women in the armed forces.



Patriarchy and women in armed conflict

Feminist theories of the correlations between gender and war aim to reject typical normative generalisations of biological propensities of men to be intrinsically violent and therefore better suited for armed conflict (Goldstein, 2001). Ultimately, this generalisation about men is harmful and relies on associating individual traits to “institutional structures and collective action” (Young, 2003, p. 2), it also ignores social-psychology that determines the impact of gender roles in violence and the debate against nature vs nurture (Pleck, 1995, cited in American Psychological Association, 2018; Reidy, et al., 2014; Sikweyiya, et al., 2020). These debates reject the nurture aspect of inherent violence in men linked to testosterone and instead focus on the effect gender roles/patriarchal constructs have in increasing the likelihood of violence. In fact we instead move towards an understanding that “aggression can result when a man experiences stress deriving from self-perceived failure to live up to masculine expectations... or when he maintains normative masculine expectations” particularly in Western culture (Berke & Zeichner, 2016, cited in American Psychological Association, 2018, p. 1).

Cynthia Enloe (1983) argues that gender and militarism are intertwined, i.e. women have always been essential to militarised efforts – she notes the roles that women perform within the armed forces, that include; sex workers, nurses, soldiers and defence industry workers. This in turn creates a gendered perspective to consider in military studies. The masculine are always the “protector” while the feminine are the “protected”. Enloe and other theorists maintain a position that the armed forces foundation is one of a “[problematic] patriarchal political-economic order” (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016, p. 10) wherein militaries are inherently masculine and dangerously violent. There is an argument to be made that when attacking civilians in warfare, the opponent is actually targeting women who represent the “state, nation and the war effort of their enemies” (Sjoberg & Peet, 2011, p. 166). In these situations the protector concerns themselves with protecting the state and requires submission of the protected, mirroring a patriarchal system at home with the masculine head being the protector/provider of the family. This is then translated into the real world wherein the citizens become the feminine protected under the control of the security state masculine. Interestingly, Young (2003) proposes

that perhaps this viewpoint of the protector need not always be violent- instead they suggest that the masculine protector feels the need to protect (and thus join the security sphere) to allow him to “shield women from harm”(p. 4). This however coincides with the lack of agency afforded to women – she is not needed to make decisions as it is he who takes precautions against all threats, his dominance is justified through a lens of protection. His role as a protector ensures that “women are still vastly outnumbered by men in the Armed Forces (UK)... [indicating] the Armed Forces as ‘still a man’s world’” (Parliament. House of Commons, 2021 cited in Harding, 2021). However, what cannot be denied is how military training relies on creating that inferior “other”, to encourage not only a comradeship between men but to encourage aggression to keep men fit. This in itself is a patriarchal structure that benefits from oppression/hostility towards women.

Consequences of women in the armed forces

Anti-militarist feminists’ comment that due to the nature of military training and how structuralised misogyny is within the military systems; women are always at risk when in the armed forces. Servicewomen are often cited as experiencing “gender discrimination...[and] sexual harassment and assault” (McKay, 2019 cited in Rea, 2020). This inherent masculine element to the military also indirectly causes inconsideration towards servicewomen in terms of equipment like body armour (which is tailored to fit a male physique).

Two big side effects from joining the armed forces is the increased reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment; the term MST (military sexual assault) was created to describe these violences taking place within the context of the military/armed forces. Consequently, 23% of women in a Veterans Affairs report stated that they had reported sexual assault and 55% reported a form of sexual harassment in America (Rea, 2020). While both men and women (and other genders) do get sexually harassed/assaulted, it is more likely for women to “face sexual assault, harassment, and discrimination while serving their country, crimes that are solely based on their gender” (Ibid).

Countries that have women already incorporated into their military systems also face issues.. One such country is Israel, wherein military service is viewed as an “institutional rite” (Montron, 2021, p. 1) for both men and women. However, it has been documented that despite both of these genders’ attendance being compulsory within the military sphere, the gendering of the organisation emphasises the “existing dichotomy between women and men” (Montron, 2021, p. 1). Despite 92% of IDF posts being open to women, the majority of women don’t occupy combat positions as most women are in secretarial roles, a role traditionally perceived as feminine. Despite media portrayals of the IDF as including feminisation however as described by Montron (2021), when a man completes his military service he has completed a rite of passage into a good citizen, however a woman can only be patriotic through duties of motherhood, despite the IDF encouraging military service for both genders. Conducive to this comes the problem that inherently as a mother a woman is deemed as pacifist. She is deemed a victim of violence and can never be the perpetrator of violence. When we consider this fact, we consider the dehumanisation of a woman, to not even be deemed as someone capable of hostility undermines a woman’s place not only in the armed forces but also is reductive to victims of female perpetrators. IDF soldiers have also commented on a culture of violence that shifts the personality of those ingrained in the military systems; “over time I became more and more violent. I went through a crazy transformation in that job” (McGreal, 2022). There is a particular worry wherein Armenia might also end up merely extending gender roles into military systems rather than attempt to defy them.

Researchers identify distinguishing forms of sexism, namely “hostile” and “benevolent” (Trobaugh, 2018, p. 47), hostile sexism is clearly aggressive however benevolent sexism (despite the name) can also be negative towards women in military contexts as it assumes that women need protection by men. When a survey was done by Trobaugh they concluded that despite women being more than qualified most trainers believed that women were “less capable of passing” (p. 49). Women in the military understand that they are held to lower standards than their male counterparts acknowledging that “there are two standards. The Army standard, and the female standard” (p. 49). There is a clear differentiation in the military to create a rhetoric of male dominance and superiority, i.e. women need to be trained to different standards as they are

not as strong as men wherein this concept creates a dichotomy of male superiority. Additionally, it has been noted that women in the military are prone to bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination during their service with accounts of gang rape, sex for a promotion and attacks by groups of men after rejecting their advances (Townsend, 2021). This in turn blocks women from moving up the hierarchy and blocks acknowledgements of their achievements, it also scares women from reporting these harassments/attacks.

Is allowing women in the armed forces facilitating gender equality?

Within feminist circles there is wide contention on whether or not allowing women in the armed forces is conducive to improving gender equality. One side of the argument acknowledges the breaking of traditional patriarchal roles through the mere presence of women in a male-dominated space, however the converse side argues that the armed forces as an inherently masculine concept is dangerous towards women and reductive to feminist goals. Additionally, there is rightful concern as to whether women owe patriarchal structures their presence, surely the only constructive way to change the patriarchal systems is not to play into them but to deconstruct them completely. By this I mean, instead of trying to change the system from the inside, women might be better off completely demolish the military systems and start again.

Firstly, let’s review some of the “for” arguments. As stated earlier, there are arguments that allowing equal rights of access for women in regard to military participation is inherently productive for feminism as access into a male-dominated space (Snyder, 2003 cited in Duncanson & Woodward, 2016). Having an equal percentage of female representation within civil spheres is regarded as a liberal feminist perspective (Smitley, 2009; Wendell, 1987; Gould, 1976) wherein they argue that women having equal access to all parts of the public sphere allows for distancing from the patriarchal tendency of reducing women to dominion over the private sphere (Wischemann & Mueller, 2004). We can argue that moving away from traditional gendered responsibilities/roles by encouraging women to engage within the public sphere is intrinsically a step forward in breaking the patriarchal system that created such roles. Theorists such as Egnell (2016) argue that by including a gendered perspective (encouraging women

not only in the armed forces but in operational and strategic roles) the armed forces have the ability to reconstruct military effectiveness. This is backed by various UN meetings and resolutions that emphasise the growing need for female personnel in armed forces, particularly in peacekeeping efforts. One such example is the 2019 meeting on Women in Peacekeeping (United Nations Security Council, 2019) that suggested having female personnel within peacekeeping forces was “not only the right thing to do, but also the smart thing” (p. 1). This comes from decades of feminist debate concerning how inclusion of a gender perspective within conflict studies can inform strategy and “be tremendously transformative by affecting both what the operation does and how it does it” (Egnell, 2016, p. 77) this is considered particularly in determining patrol routes and facilitating open discussions within communities; these attempt to deconstruct traditional violence paradigms by encouraging consideration to all violence directed at civilians (sexual, fiscal etc). The UN insists that “female soldiers and gender perspectives are absolutely essential for certain tasks” (p. 78) because they serve as role models for young women looking to break into male dominated spaces especially in fields that involve cultural understanding and promotion of women’s rights. Egnell (2016) argues that military effectiveness will increase if we consider not only the traditional aspects of military activities (warfare) but also a focus on the supporting operations of stabilisation and democratisation. In terms of military capabilities (size etc) opening the armed forces to women allows a wider array of eligible people thus increasing military size, however we must consider that the area with most potential for gender equality efforts is actually in strategy and operations. This essentially dictates that every aspect of an operation must be considered (social, economic, cultural, political, distribution of equality and resources) thus increasing the information gathering within a unit by providing access to local women. Women are more likely to trust other women so by having a woman soldier you can gain the trust of the local population (United Nations Security Council, 2019). However, we must remember that this particular argument argues for military enlargement wherein the final goal is not gender equality but having a bigger military presence. Female officers may also be conducive in deconstructing gender roles concerning “the protector” and the “protected” which has potential to transform patriarchal hierarchies. This of course can be quite contested in feminist spheres by recognising that the goal here is not the equality of

genders as inherently the military is a violent space where positions of influence are really only allocated to the top, will changing of gender roles really encourage gender equality in a system like this? We must acknowledge that “military organizations generally have a culture that will resist the implementation of gender perspectives, the process of change is far from impossible” (p. 87).

Secondly, we must consider that arguing against women joining the armed forces can encourage stereotypical assumptions of women being associated with pacifism and “makes women less likely to be taken seriously in public life” (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016, p. 7). Satyogi (2023) evidences this by recalling the ‘Moral Mother’ syndrome wherein women are viewed as innately pacifist and men as innately violent.

Leonardo (1985) explains the Moral Mother syndrome as one where women have “both the strength and moral righteousness needed to end military terror” (p. 607). This in turn puts a big stressor of expectation on women to be “innately pacifist and men as innately warmongering” (p. 602). By pushing for women in the military we move away from forcing women to right men’s wrongs, we move away from placing this responsibility on the woman to burden themselves with the patriarchal actions of “war-mongering men”. Overall, there are many arguments that “women have enjoyed successful and fulfilling employment as members of armed forces” (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016, p. 6).

On the other hand, there are many contemporary feminists who sit firmly on the opposite side and argue that women in the military may not coincide with gender equality.

Firstly, some feminists argue that the introduction of women into armed forces is simply a form of tokenism. Duncanson and Woodward (2016), argue that it can be possible that “women may only ever be tokens, never fully accommodated, and militarism may never be challenged” (p. 6). This suggests a case that women are never fully equal in the military due to “routine workplace discrimination, the greater efforts women personnel must make to gain unit acceptance and the ways in which they are constructed as disruptive [to the status quo]” (p. 5). Women are continuously refused combat roles and opportunities to climb the ladder and whether allowed, they still face discrimination (Ibid).

As mentioned in the 'patriarchy and women in armed conflict' section of this essay, the structure of the armed forces and armed conflict relies on creating an "other". This "other" is an enemy that is often "inferior [and] feminized...as a means of motivation meant to attain levels of fitness and aggression" (Ibid). Therefore, some feminists argue that the system itself is built on misogyny (sexual violence and harassment) which makes it impossible for women to deconstruct this foundation. There is healthy scrutiny from anti-militarist feminists who insist that despite growing attempts to provide equal opportunities, a woman's influence is better kept to political intervention. Enloe (1983) argues that women aren't being told the full truth as progressive gender change is incapable in an armed forces context. Despite attempts to move away from ideologies relying on the moral mother syndrome some feminists argue that women will always "bear a disproportionate responsibility for the labour required by people who are ill, illiterate, frail, despairing, very young or very old" (Ruddick, 2009, p. 305) which in itself holds a certain power. There are also some theories that encourage that women are actually "spiritual preservers of the earth and all living beings" (McAllister, 1983 cited in, Satyogi, 2023).

Additionally, most contemporary feminists argue that militarisation is inherently anti-feminist and would encourage the destruction of the entire military system, therefore, in this case we can assume that they would not find women in the military acceptable as the strategy for inclusion requires "women to assimilate to the dominant gender norm of masculinity" (Squires, 2005) which is inherently not feminine. Consequently, there are concerns about military effectiveness through inclusion of women not only by reducing existing hierarchical cohesivity of existing units; i.e., existing units may not accept nor welcome new women in their groups from prior understanding of patriarchal roles. Some feminists have argued that the inputting of women in these extremely patriarchal environments could prove dangerous to women and that "women are never fully equal in the military" (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016, p. 5).

Armenian armed forces

In June of 2023, the Armenian parliament approved the first reading of a legislation allowing voluntary military conscription for women. In May the legislation passed all the formalities therefore women aged

between 18-27 will be able to apply for military service for a term of six months. Each new recruit will be paid around 2,500 dollars (Teslova, 2023).

Within the Armenian armed forces it has been continually documented that those who do not fit the standard (i.e. cis, male and straight) can face bullying, discrimination, violence and ostracisation within the military. There have been multiple documented incidences of violence against particularly queer people (Avetisyan, 2023) wherein victims have suggested being treated "like they'd treat a murderer" (p. 1). This then causes those with queer identities to hide themselves in the army and not report discrimination so as to avoid further harassment. Although this is largely situated towards male queer conscripts, we also must consider that queer women who want to join the armed forces may also be targeted for their identities beyond just their female identity.

In order to improve gender equality through the inclusion of women in the armed forces the Armenian government needs to have gender perspectives mainstreamed throughout the organisation: this is defined as change within a system that has encouraged both deconstruction and reconstruction of patriarchal standards (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016). The inclusion of gendered mainstreaming initiates what feminists call a regendered military that deconstructs gendered roles wherein the masculine is violent and the feminine (UNDP, 2019-2021) is pacifist. This encourages women to enter traditionally male dominated roles while also incites men to incorporate more feminine values such as empathy and respect. Armenian women have historically faced a patriarchal society that excludes women in decision-making roles, in 2018 Armenia was 115th out of 149 in the Gender Gap Index however since then Armenia has risen to 61st out of 146 countries indicating that Armenia is attempting to encourage gender equality within their regimes (World Economic Forum, 2023). Additionally, as a member of the Council of Europe, Armenia has been called upon by PACE to commit themselves to Resolution 2120 that states member states must provide various changes/additions to the armed forces in order to promote gender equality. These changes include, carrying out research for the reasons of difficulties encountered in recruiting women for military duties, creating a climate more conducive to gender equality by establishing and supporting networks of military women and teaching on the gender dimension at every

stage of military training and, attempting to combat gender based violence through providing hotlines, assistance to victims, penalties to perpetrators of sexual violence and adopt a zero tolerance policy towards gender violence (Helsinki Citizens' Assembly - Vanadzor, 2023).



Conclusion

In conclusion, while this author cannot say whether or not encouraging military service for women is conducive to gender equality. However, through Duncanson and Woodward's suggestion, gender streaming recommendations have the possibility to reduce harm against women/ improve gender equality within the military. These include suggestions such as firstly moving away from tokenism by encouraging meaningful women centred participation. This includes; promoting women to leadership positions and encouraging their input. Secondly, the expectations of physical fitness being defined to male characteristics need to be changed to compromise de-stressing physical superiority to remove focus on toxic masculinity. Thirdly and finally, by addressing the high statistics of sexual harassment and assault by holding leaders accountable, we can aim to diminish hostility towards women (Nagel, et al., 2021). We cannot do away with military systems in their entirety nor is it feasible in a time of unstable political relations for Armenia to start again from the bottom, therefore, by including a service of gender streaming we can hopefully start a process of reconstruction.

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