The Gendered Apparatus of the Military:

A Study of the Army Officer's Wife in India

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Declaration

I have read and understood regulation 17.9 of the Regulations for students of the SOAS, University of London, concerning plagiarism. I undertake that all the material presented for examination is my own work and has not been written for me, in whole or in part, by any other person. I also undertake that any quotation or paraphrase from the published or unpublished work of another person has been duly acknowledged in the work which I present for examination.

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Thesis Abstract

Military wives have recently become the subject of research with an increasing focus on the role of their labour in upholding and reproducing processes of militarisation. This thesis examines the centrality of Indian Army officers' wives and explores how their gendered labour is upheld while they also hold the potential to critique the durability and ubiquity of military and patriarchal power.

Based on over 80 interviews with women married to officers of the Indian Army conducted over seven months of fieldwork, this thesis contends that officers' wives are not apolitical or irrelevant to the gender order or military apparatus. They consciously engage with and perceive their distinct relationship with the military apparatus and the broader socio-cultural milieu as expressions of their agency (choices). They stress their capacity to control their labour and distinguish themselves from other women in the larger military and civil order in multiple subjective ways.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Re-Entering the Field

I returned to Delhi in September 2019 for my fieldwork. My parents threw a dinner party to welcome me home and had invited their military couple friends (most of whom I had known all my life). I had attended and had helped my parents host countless such army parties/dinners before, knowing (subconsciously) that there was a difference between an 'army party' (a gathering where military couple friends of my parents were invited) and a 'party' (a meeting where 'civilian' friends of my parents were invited). This distinction was often made based on how my parents referred to the couple coming over. Guests were identified by rank, and there was an implicit implication that preparations must be *different* for the army parties. In short, I knew what to expect and what was expected of me at this army dinner party. I knew where to put the bowls of snacks, the coasters, the ice bucket, and the cutlery. While preparing the house for dinner, I placed bowls of *moongfalee* (an Indian snack) on the side tables in different parts of the drawing room and balcony. The snack bowl set inside and outside the drawing room, the sitting area (the 'inside'), and the patio (the 'outside') did not represent something casual or trivial. The 'inside-outside' placement of the snack bowls represented gendered relations or divisions — those that I would experience and observe in the coming hours. From that moment onward, the dinner was no longer a mundane obligatory dinner for me but my first conscious field observation. What I observed and experienced at that dinner party not only represented what I had watched and experienced all my life growing up as an "army child" or even "a military brat" but also informed this thesis and its hypothesis.

Keeping in line with strict military timing, within 15 minutes of the clock striking 8 pm (the time written on the invite), all the guests had arrived. The uncles and aunties[1] had greeted my parents and the other guests and had taken their respective (gendered) places. Within an hour into the party, the gendered divisions, the reason behind placing the snack bowl inside and outside the drawing room, became evident. After taking their drinks from the small bar, the men either stayed huddled around the table on which the bar lay or grouped themselves on the balcony. The women sat on the sofas and chairs and circled 'inside' the dining room.

[1] In Indian culture, the terms Uncle and Auntie are commonly used to refer to older individuals as a sign of respect and familiarity, even outside familial relations. This practice extends into the military institution, as such terms become part of a broader framework of fictive kinship. Within this setting, men and women are often regarded as uncles and aunties, shaped by both societal expectations and military norms. It is also worth noting that boys are often explicitly taught to address uncles and aunties as Sir and Ma'am, reflecting a formal mode of respect, while girls typically continue to use the more familiar terms Uncle and Auntie.

During the time of my fieldwork and this dinner party, the ruling party in India, through abrogating Article 370 in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, revoked Kashmir's special status by integrating it into the Indian Union. This news made headlines and was amongst the most popular topics of discussion at this particular dinner party. Men discussed the causes and consequences of the move passionately and sometimes aggressively. They asserted their opinions and were vocal in voicing their perspectives. The women, on the other hand, also *commented* on the abrogation. Some women declared it a "bold move". Other women celebrated the government with statements such as "bahut badiya kiya"[2]. A few challenged the decision considering it an outcome of political manoeuvres and state policy. Women, however, ended their conversations after having commented. They expressed their opinions, their support, or apprehension for the move. However, women did not participate in discussions, debates, or dialogues like men did. The men did not engage seriously with the women on this topic. Nor did the women partake in men's conversation around the bar or on the balcony. There was a sense of accepted silence on the subject. The silence was gendered and occupied gendered spaces 'inside' and 'outside' my home.

Moreover, the officer's wives in my home that night encouraged me to "go and sit with the uncles" and "speak to the uncles about the abrogation". They believed "speaking to the uncles" (men) would help *me* "learn about the move and what is happening in Kashmir" and understand more broadly "how politics work". In doing so, the officer's wives attributed a masculine character to political conversations and identities. At the same time, they accepted some spaces, such as the balcony, as political spaces where political discussions were common while treating other spaces (such as the sofa) as apolitical.

I eventually did join the officers. I sat with the men sitting on the balcony or next to the bar to be a part of the intense political discussions they were having. When I made this transition across the gendered spaces, two things happened. Some men were sincerely interested in engaging with me and treated me 'seriously'. I don't think I was taken seriously by most because of my gender and my age. Some listened to me but interrupted to add something. Most took it upon themselves to lecture me on 'the correct way of thinking' and what was considered utopian. Most of the time, the gendered monologues ended with men making definitive statements about the state's legitimacy, national security, and the necessity of military force and strong leadership in the real world.

At some point during the dinner party, the attention steered towards me, and I was asked questions about London, my marriage plans, and my lifestyle. The most pertinent question was about my PhD

[2] Translation: "It was a good thing to do."

and what I was "researching". I remember standing in the centre of the living room (at the time, anxious like I was about to recite a poem), with all eyes on me, and me saying the following: "I am researching the military wife. I am interested in learning more about the military wife and how or what she thinks of the military and politics".

This statement received mixed responses. The responses to my research topic provided an insight into the complex worldviews military personnel held of the 'military wife' and how differently men and women in my home imagined the 'army officer's wife'.

Personnel deemed the military wife to play a critical role in the apparatus. Women raised their hands, clapped, or celebrated the topic's significance. They believed the officer's wife provided essential support. She kept the "family together", ensured a "tension-free home" for the military husbands, and made it possible for the officers to focus on their jobs. They declared the wife to be the "backbone" of the military (and the military husband).

There were also those women who trivialised this celebrated nature of the officer's wife and her centrality to the apparatus. They did so as they compared the officer's wife to the average (civilian) housewife. Military personnel believed the wife was *less* significant to the military apparatus and its functioning than men. Women spoke of limited career opportunities in the military or stressed the impact of military life on them and their children (in the context of "staying away" from military husbands/fathers). These officers' wives shared the constraints they believed they had to endure being part of the military and how, for instance, constantly moving was a practice they did not enjoy.

Another insight was the assumption guests shared about my research. The idea that as a researcher interested in exploring the relationship between gender and the military, I was *not* directing my attention to women in combat but to officers' wives surprised my guests. Some guests assumed my topic was women in combat and asked me about this gendered theme. Others began discussing amongst themselves the "problems" and "challenges" of women in combat. Most military personnel in my home, through ordinary conversations that night, cited many reasons that ranged from military effectiveness, discipline, national security, women's safety, and biological differences as rationales to support combat as a masculine arena.

The Research Question and Hypothesis

I spent that night penning my reflections on the dinner party. I noted what I had observed, heard, and discussed. I thought about the attitudes and responses of the military personnel that surrounded me — the gendered divisions I had witnessed, the gendered topics of conversation I had heard, the gendered understandings that were wielded, and the gendered control exercised. Military personnel, their opinions, gestures, and attitudes were nothing new to me *per s*e. However, that night, I had more consciously witnessed and observed gendered labour, women's perspectives, and worldviews through a feminist-inspired critical military security studies (CMS) lens.

The dinner party example is significant, as it has helped better contextualise some of the phenomena I explore in this thesis. My reflections on the dinner party reaffirm the assumptions and motivations to undertake this research and enter the field.

For example, the gendered divisions between the domestic spaces of the living room and the balcony were not new to me as I re-entered the field. I had witnessed similar gendered seating segregation before in many public-private gatherings. However, I had yet to observe the gendered divide through a feminist-inspired CMS lens. The gendered divisions represented the public-private dichotomy and gendered themes men and women engaged in, respectively. Officers taking up spaces 'outside' on the 'balcony' defined men's position in public spaces more broadly. Women 'inside' the 'house' and 'on the sofas' represented women's positioning within the private realm more generally.

Moreover, the private was associated with the domestic and the family — the *apolitical* — where political discussions were *commented* on and not discussed. Meanwhile, the public was imagined as a 'political' space where "political conversations, debates, or discussions" took place. In sending me to the balcony and telling me to "talk to the men" and "hear what '*they*' have to say", most officer's wives in my home that night, through their nonchalant gestures or comments, identified the 'outside' as a 'masculine' 'political' space relative to the 'inside' (the 'feminine' spaces associated with the 'ladies').

As another example, the responses to my PhD topic were particularly insightful, as they indicated how the 'military wife' was valued by military personnel themselves. The 'military wife' was celebrated and deemed crucial within gendered roles and identities associated with domesticity, wifehood, motherhood, and the family. Simultaneously, the 'military wife' was considered "trivial" to military functioning compared to men and their roles in the apparatus. Furthermore, I believe the subject of excluding women from combat generated more engagement at

the party than the subject of officers' wives. This personal insight hinted at how mundanely the subject of officers' wives and their significance to the apparatus was treated by most military personnel.

In other words, ordinary conversations with officers' wives in private settings of my home helped me understand how different women utilised rationales of security, social constructions of gender (those they perceived as natural), and pragmatism to engage with the gendered military apparatus they were a part of.

In line with this motivation, this study explores the following research question:

How do Indian Army officers' wives engage with and perceive the military apparatus and the broader socio-cultural milieu they are a part of?

To address this question, the research explores Indian Army officers' wives' lived experiences and their socio-political labour — their opinions, interpretations, and worldviews of specific military practices, policies, and socio-cultural norms and ideologies. The work explores how officers' wives self-identify, describe themselves, and perceive their roles and positionings within the military apparatus and the broader socio-cultural milieu they are a part of, including whether — and how — they interpret or perceive the Indian army or institutions of family-society as patriarchal.

In doing so, the study challenges the exclusion of officers' wives from critical discussions on militarisation, securitisation, and patriarchy. It further contests dominant narratives that position officers' wives as passive actors or default supporters of military power, while examining the contours of gendered agency within institutional settings. The study interrogates how gendered labour and power serve to sustain—while also holding the potential to subvert and critique—the durability and ubiquity of military and patriarchal power. More critically, the scholarship highlights how most Indian Army officers' wives perceived their distinct relationship with the military apparatus and the broader socio-cultural milieu as expressions of their agency (choices). Women believed they had the capacity to control their own labour and articulated their "liberated" stances in relative and subjective ways.

Why Indian Army Officers' Wives?

The Indian Armed Forces is one of the world's largest, with over a million active personnel. It has three main branches: the Army, Navy, and Air Force. This study focuses on the Indian Army specifically. The institution is deeply integrated into the fabric of Indian society and reflects the country's socio-economic, cultural, religious, and regional fabric (Chowdhry 2010; Roy 2013; Pant 2020).

Indian society is markedly stratified by class and caste identities, with significant education, professional, wealth, and social status disparities.

The Indian Army mirrors these class divisions, with distinct differences between the lives of officers and enlisted soldiers (Roy 2013; Khalidi 2001; Pant 2020). The army has historically recruited enlisted soldiers from rural and lower socioeconomic backgrounds/economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Military service is perceived as an avenue for upward economic and social mobility for these social groups. In contrast, the officer corps tends to come from more privileged, upper-middle class backgrounds, mirroring the societal hierarchy (ibid.).

The Indian Army also reflects the diversity of India's caste system. Historically, certain castes and communities have been overrepresented in the military, particularly those traditionally associated with martial traditions and warrior classes (e.g., Kshatriyas). Similarly, lower caste communities constituted certain regiments like the Bihar and the Mahar units. The Indian Army's regimental system[3] helps understand caste stratification better (ibid.).

Moreover, the Indian Army is greatly revered in Indian society and is regarded as a distinct, socially prestigious, and highly respected institution. More significantly, and in particular, being associated with the office cadre of the Indian Army confers elevated social standing, admiration, and respect (Chowdhry 2010, 2014, 2015; Pant 2020).

Within this framework, the wives of Indian Army officers occupy a distinct and privileged position, both within the military apparatus and in the larger socio-cultural landscape of India.

[3] The Indian Army's regimental system: The regimental system is unique in its cultural and regional affiliations. Certain regions and communities historically favoured under the Martial Race Theory remain strong in the Indian Army. For example, some regiments (also known as units) often draw from specific communities or regions, such as the Rajputs, Sikh Regiment, Gorkha Rifles, and Madras Regiment, fostering a strong sense of tradition, belonging, and pride in maintaining respective cultural and regional identities.

Officers' wives predominantly belong to the upper-middle class, English-speaking, educationally advantaged elite sections of Indian society and are positioned within the socio-cultural landscape of "new-modern urban India" (Chowdhry 2010; Mamgain 2025; Nandedkar 2019; Randhawa 2010). This background gives officers' wives significant social capital, economic stability, influential social networks, and opportunities within and outside the military compared to enlisted wives within the military order (ibid.). For instance, being a military wife in India, especially an officer's wife, is desirable and prestigious. Officers' wives are often imagined and constructed as "ideal" embodiments of grace, decorum, and competence and are represented as such in public discourse and media representations of military life (ibid.).

Moreover, while officers' wives perform domestic labour common to all women who are wives, what makes the officers' wives is the "peculiarities of absent husbands, frequent moves, and relocation" (Mamgain 2025; Nandedkar 2019; p. 677, Dobrofsky and Batterson 1977). Officers' wives have the unique experience of staying away from their husbands while also acting as head of the house more often than women in civil society (ibid.). Lastly, officers' wives also reflect the social and symbolic capital derived from their husbands' rank and appointment in the military (Soman 2009; Mamgain 2025; Nandedkar 2019). They play prominent roles in organisational activities and participate in philanthropic activities, such as those organised for soldiers' wives of the Indian Army through the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA).

Officers' wives' unique and privileged socio-economic position within both patriarchal Indian society and the Indian Army is important for understanding how self-identified elite and educated women engage with gendered military and socio-cultural practices and whether (or how) they interpret or perceive the Indian Army or institutions of family-society as patriarchal.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis consists of eight chapters.

Following the introduction in Chapter One, Chapter Two surveys existing literature that examines the patriarchal underpinnings of Indian society, including institutions such as marriage and family, as well as the context of "new-urban modern" India. This body of work provides a framework for understanding the socio-cultural milieu that officers' wives are situated in, describe, and engage with. The chapter also reviews literature from feminist international relations and feminist security studies, particularly scholarship that theorises the complex relationship between gender, the military apparatus, and processes of militarisation. It highlights how gendered labour has been analysed and interpreted within these existing bodies of literature.

Chapter Three highlights existing literature on military wives across different geographical contexts and examines how gendered agency has been explored within this body of work. It engages with key debates in the subfield of Critical Military Studies (CMS) and draws attention to the central concepts of analysis and frameworks proposed and utilised in this research. The chapter introduces the Military-Patriarchal Power (MPP) model and proposes archetypes of the "military wife". It then outlines the rationale developed in this research to theorise and illustrate officers' wives' complex and shifting worldviews regarding different military and socio-cultural practices.

Chapter Four outlines and summarises the methodology of the research. It details the research plan, methods employed, field sites, research participants, and their identity markers. The chapter considers the researcher's insider/outsider positionality concerning the participants, field site, and the overall research. It also explores how the researcher's identity markers shape power dynamics in the study. The chapter also engages with the political and epistemological dimensions of representing officers' wives' socio-political labour and shares the motivations and limitations of the study.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven are the ethnographic chapters of this thesis. Each empirical chapter examines how officers' wives utilise different rationales (those proposed and conceptualised in this study) to engage with the various military and socio-cultural practices.

Chapter Five introduces the officers' wives and examines their empirical narratives as they engage with the "micro-politics" of military power (Hyde 2015). The objective is to highlight how women's distinct interpretations of military practices and expectations constitute their expressions of choice (agency). The chapter explores how officers' wives occupy different positions along the Military-Patriarchal Power (MPP) model and embody characteristics of the 'military wife' archetypes proposed

in the study. It also addresses women's self-representations and how they are used to distinguish themselves from "other" women within the military apparatus and those located in "broader" civil society. The chapter examines how officers' wives' socio-political labour serves to uphold while also having the potential to critique the durability and ubiquity of military power in spaces beyond the battlefield.

Chapter Six builds on the previous chapter by introducing a new set of participants and further exploring officers' wives' narratives, this time with a focus on their interpretations of socio-cultural practices. As in the previous chapter, it examines how expressions of choice serve as acts of agency. The chapter again considers how women position themselves along the MPP model and reflect aspects of the 'military wife' archetypes identified in the study. It continues to analyse women's self-identifications and how they differentiate themselves from other women. This chapter investigates how officers' wives' socio-political labour serves to uphold while also having the potential to critique the durability and ubiquity the durability and ubiquity of patriarchal socio-cultural norms, division, and ideologies in private and public arenas.

Chapter Seven is divided into two sections. The first section, titled 'Officers' Wives and Social Norms', explores how officers' wives — whose engagement with the micro-politics of military power was examined in chapter five — relate to broader socio-cultural practices. The following section, titled 'Officers' Wives and Military Presence', shifts focus to officers' wives — previously discussed in chapter six concerning patriarchal power — and examines their relationship to the micro-politics of military power. The chapter builds on earlier empirical analyses and offers original insights into gendered political labour — specifically, how the officers' wives featured in this study perceive and interpret militarist policies, responses, and military presence in regions declared as 'states of emergency' by the Indian state (Chenoy 2000; Kazi 2007).

Chapter Eight outlines the key contributions of the thesis and highlights the potential significance of complex, gendered socio-political labour in upholding and critiquing the durability and ubiquity of patriarchal military practices and socio-cultural norms in public and private spaces. The chapter also examines officers' wives' agency and situates their experiences within broader debates on gendered agency among military wives in other geographical contexts.

Chapter Nine concludes the study by reflecting on the relationship between socialisation, institutionalisation, and gendered socio-political labour and identifies avenues for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Patriarchy, Culture, and the Social Order in India

The following literature provides a critical framework for understanding the patriarchal underpinnings of Indian society and the broader socio-cultural milieu that officers' wives of the Indian Army are situated in, engage with, and describe.

For example, Patricia Uberoi (1995, 1996) highlights "patrilineal descent, patrilocal marriage, and authority" as characteristic features of Indian patriarchal society, noting that children are considered part of the father's lineage, wives relocate to their husband's community after marriage, property and succession pass through the male line, and family authority rests primarily with the father or other male relatives (p. 200, 1995).

Scholars such as Leela Dube (1988), Malavika Karlekar (1998), and Meenakshi Thapan (1995) have examined how, in contemporary urban India, women are constructed as "gendered subjects" associated with specific gendered identities, differences, and roles. Karlekar examines how essentialist assumptions, such as the belief that girls are "inherently vulnerable and physically or mentally weak", are prevalent in India and play a critical role in constructing rigidly gendered obligations, as well as in reinforcing devaluation and discrimination across various spheres of life (p. 1745, Karlekar 1998). Thapan similarly argues that women in India are understood to be "naturally" associated with the private arena (the home and the kitchen) and notions of domesticity and are perceived as the "prime nurturers and caretakers of children", regardless of other demands on their time and resources (p. 35, Thapan 1995). Dube also notes that activities such as kitchen work, household chores, and childcare are regarded as "natural" or "appropriate" forms of labour for women and are understood as "feminine spheres" (p. 17, Dube 1988).

Dube further highlights how, in India, "considerable importance" is attached to how girls behave in public — such as how they "sit, stand, speak, and interact with others". They are often taught to "demonstrate self-restraint" and avoid behaving in ways seen as "masculine" (p. 15, Dube 1988). She also points out the prevalence of gendered familial values in Indian society, detailing the special value accorded to male children, including how "boys are accepted as permanent members of the family" and considered essential for continuing the family line, in comparison to girls, whose departure from the natal home is deemed inevitable and crucial for upholding and maintaining respectable social standing (p. 12, Dube 1988). Karlekar (1998) has paid attention to the pervasive violence against girl children, including female foeticide, infanticide, and sex-selective abortions, to shed light on the deep-

seated societal biases against girls and underscore the culturally privileged position of sons in urban Indian society.

The Indian family, as a central institution, has been critically examined in existing literature for its role in reinforcing patriarchal norms (Kakar 2006; Thapan 2001; Khanna 2009; Karlekar 1998; Chowdhry 2015; Kandiyoti 1988).

For example, Sudhir Kakar (2006) has explored the significance of the family and of "family obligations in the life of an Indian". Kakar notes:

> *"The family and family obligations are the glue that holds Indian society together. The family is the exclusive source of satisfaction for all needs. In the imagination of most Indians, a man's worth and, indeed, recognition of his identity are inextricable from the reputation of his family. How a man lives and what he does are rarely seen as a product of individual effort or aspiration but are interpreted in the light of his family's circumstances and reputation in the wider society. Individual success or failure makes sense only in a family context. 'How can a son of family X behave like this?' is as much an expression of contempt as 'How could he not turn out well? After all, he is the son of family Y!' is a sign of approval." (p. 215, Kakar 2006)*

Moreover, Kakar emphasises how the "family" as a social unit is the "most significant social influence" on a woman's life in India. A woman's "identity" — and often her entire life — is typically understood to be "determined" by the men in her family, such as her father, brother, or husband (p. 58, Kakar 2006).

In exploring the nature of the Indian family, Thapan (2001) concludes that the family serves as a key space ("ground") where "heterosexual and patriarchal norms, values, and ideals are nurtured and sustained" (p. 369). Within this structure, the masculine father figure is not only "idealised and respected" but also regarded as an "authoritative" figure — typically characterised as a "workaholic" and imagined as a "primary provider for the family" who is often emotionally distant from the family (p. 363, Thapan 2001). Kakar similarly points out that the "traditional Indian father" is often seen as "distant, aloof, and forbidding". He typically does not engage in playing with or caring for young children, as his main role is viewed as "disciplining" them (p. 218, Kakar 2006). According to Karlekar, the "family and household" not only shape an Indian woman's sense of "self, personhood, and identity" but also play a central role in defining gender-specific roles and obligations and, subsequently, her subordinate position within the private arena (p. 1745-46, Karlekar 1998).

In addition to Karlekar (1998), Prem Chowdhry (2015) and Maheshvari Naidu (2011) examine the prevailing familial hierarchy within Indian households, with particular attention to the "power dynamics" and "tense hierarchical relationship" between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, and the broader implications this has for women's status and autonomy in Indian society.

Karlekar observes that as women age, they "gain status within the family" by becoming mothers of sons and eventually mothers-in-law, "a distinct identity" that is often associated with the "oppression" of newly married women entering the family (p. 1746, Karlekar 1998). Similarly, Chowdhry points out that the mother-in-law not only "asserts and maintains" her authority within the household but serves as an "effective channel" in reinforcing patriarchal norms, including enabling gendered dominance (p. 8, Chowdhry 2015). In the same vein, Naidu highlights how mothers-in-law contribute to the transmission of patriarchal values, practices, and attitudes by "silencing, normalising, and sanctioning" domestic violence and abuse directed at daughters-in-law within the home, family, and marital relationships (p. 90-91, Naidu 2011).

Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) has also addressed this gendered hierarchy within Indian families and identified women as one probable cause for its perpetuation. She contends that the "deprivation and hardship" a woman experiences as a young bride in a patriarchal extended family is "eventually superseded" by the control and authority she gains over her "own subservient daughters-in-law". This "cyclical" pattern of gaining power within the household and the "anticipation of inheriting" the authority of older women often leads women to "internalise" patriarchal beliefs themselves (p. 279, Kandiyoti 1988). Kandiyoti further argues that women may resist processes of change because they perceive the traditional "normative order as slipping away". Despite its flaws, the "old system" is seen as offering "respectability and protection" (p. 282-83, Kandiyoti 1988).

In addition to the family as an institution of patriarchal control, scholars (Naidu 2011; Dube 1988; Chakravarti 1995; Karlekar 1998) have also paid attention to marriage in India and explored the institution's role in shaping women's personhood, positioning, and roles within broader Indian society and the family/household.

For example, Naidu notes that marriage in Indian traditions is considered a "sacred institution and a religious union" — not just between two individuals, but between two families (p. 84, Naidu 2011). Similarly, Dube (1988) has examined marriage in India as a central institution through which girls' lives are structured and understood. Daughters are viewed as "temporary members" of the family, and their "eventual departure" from their natal home is treated as inevitable. This perception is reinforced

through widely practised marriage rituals, such as *kanyadaan*, the ceremonial giving away of a daughter (p. 12, Dube 1988).

Writing about marriage traditions in North India, Karlekar assesses how cultural norms strongly value marriage as a woman's "primary social achievement". She notes that marriage is widely considered "essential" for girls, regardless of class, caste, religion, or ethnicity (p. 1745-46, Karlekar 1998). Uma Chakravarti (1995) also highlights how marital status determines a woman's place in family and society, bestowing married women certain privileges and forms of social capital unavailable to unmarried or widowed women.

Uthara Soman (2009) directs attention to the experiences of working women in Indian society to highlight how patriarchy constructs marriage and motherhood as the "pinnacle of achievement" for women. She explains that women's roles as mothers often "structure their whole lives", leading many to choose part-time work, which typically results in lower and unequal pay. Moreover, Soman highlights a central element of patriarchal ideology in India — the strong emphasis on female sexual purity. Women are often "not allowed control" over their own sexuality and reproductive choices. This includes restrictions on prolonged interaction with unrelated men, travelling without a male escort, or living independently from their families. According to Soman, "gendered behaviours and bodies" are "regulated", with clear distinctions made between what is considered "acceptable or unacceptable" for women. Social and cultural norms define "what women should and should not do with their bodies". As Soman (2009) highlights, in Indian society, having a child outside of marriage or expressing sexuality with more than one partner continues to be broadly "frowned upon or rejected" (p. 257).

Several scholars have paid attention to "new-modern urban India" and have explored how patriarchal ideologies function as a "collective social power" in this India (Chakravarti 2000; Krishnaraj 1999, 2010; Patil 2011; Thapan 2001; Kakar 2006; Baviskar and Ray 2020; Naidu 2011; Soman 2009).

For instance, Chakravarti (2000) observes how the "underdeveloped" "rural" India has given way to a "rich, vibrant, and urban" India shaped by modernisation, feminism, cosmopolitanism, and globalisation. Krishnaraj (p. 14, 2010) similarly assesses how "modern" India has witnessed the "alteration" of women's "traditional" gendered roles and gender relations within the home and the family (p. 45). Vrushali Patil (p. 202, 2011) describes the men and women of this emerging India as "English-speaking elites" — increasingly individualistic, body-conscious, global in outlook, and immersed in a cosmopolitan consumer culture. Moreover, these scholars highlight how the "upper-class urban Indian milieu" is marked by the emergence of the 'English-speaking', 'educated', 'elite',

‘modern’, ‘assertive’, ‘working’ woman ‘who knows what she wants’ (Chakravarti 2000; Krishnaraj 2010; Patil 2011).

In a similar vein, Thapan (2001) observes how “modern” constructions of Indian womanhood define women as both “liberated” and “of substance”, with increased visibility in the paid labour market — both in newer sectors of paid employment like fashion, journalism, and social activism, and in traditionally male domains such as the military, police, and banking (p. 360).

Reflecting on changes in familial dynamics within modern India, Kakar (2006) notes that fathers are no longer seen as “distant or forbidding” figures. Instead, “modern fathers” are more emotionally available and engage with their children as “playmates”, fostering closer bonds and promoting a “less hierarchical” father-son relationship (p. 218-219).

Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray (2020) explain how common it is for middle- and upper-class families in new-modern India to hire domestic help” to handle household tasks and kitchen work such as cleaning, cooking, and washing. They argue that this support is essential for the “smooth functioning” of these households, enabling middle-class women to challenge traditional division of labour and work outside the home by transferring domestic responsibilities to “lower-working class wage earners” (p. 563).

Existing theorisation, while acknowledging shifts in patriarchal gender dynamics, argues that “new-modern urban” India remains patriarchal.

Thapan points out that the “new-elite educated” Indian woman “transcends” traditional domestic roles and is presented as both “modern and liberated”. However, her identity is marked by “ambivalence” — she appears progressive but remains “rooted in tradition, family, and customary practices” (p. 370, Thapan 2001). The scholar contends while the modern Indian woman takes part in paid labour and holds career aspirations, she must ensure her career is “compatible” with her familial and domestic commitments and responsibilities (p. 361-365, Thapan 2001). Similarly, Krishnaraj (2010) argues that “modern” Indian women “hold relative freedom — relative because traditions still bound them” (p. 45).

Kakar (2006) has evaluated how modernisation, the rise of individualism, and the emergence of the modern middle-class woman have influenced Indian family dynamics. While these changes have reshaped family interactions and obligations, Kakar (2006) argues that, in contrast to Western societies—where “generational conflict” is “not only expected but considered necessary” for social change—traditional responsibilities within Indian families have “not disappeared” (p. 216).For

example, although people may feel less "obligated" to care for extended relatives, the expectation to emotionally, socially, and financially support ageing parents remains strong. Naidu offers a similar perspective, noting that even when young couples prefer living in nuclear households, they often "continue to maintain strong emotional and financial ties with their respective parents" (p. 85, Naidu 2011). In a similar vein, Thapan (2001) examines how modern Indian family life has "changed" from "traditional extended families" to the more common "nuclear family" structure (p. 360). However, the scholar stresses that this shift has not led to significant changes in how roles and responsibilities within the nuclear family are understood or carried out. Thapan concludes "new middle-class urban India" continues to operate within a "safe, patriarchal haven" when it comes to family dynamics (ibid.).

Soman (2009) observes a significant rise in women's participation in paid work in contemporary modern India. Many unmarried women, she argues, insist on marrying men who will support their decision to continue working. Women who continue working after marriage and childbirth often gain a sense of empowerment, financial independence, "more bargaining power within the family", and a stronger role in decision-making — advantages that 'older' generations of women rarely "seldom" experienced. Despite these changes, Soman highlights how many working women still place their domestic responsibilities and familial welfare above their professional interests and career aspirations. This suggests that even though women have entered the "paid" workforce and "public" life, they continue to stay closely connected to their gendered roles, in line with traditional patriarchal expectations (p. 266, Soman 2009):

> *"Working women invariably need the support of family members to meet their domestic responsibilities. In most cases, the role will be played by their parents or in-laws, and when they become old or sick, unable to perform the household chores, women are found to quit their jobs in the midst of their careers to take care of their aged parents or teenaged children" (p. 268, Soman 2009).*

Soman underscores a distinct feature of Indian society and highlights how attitudes and mindsets towards patriarchy differ based on their family background, level of education, social class, and context:

> *"The relative position of women in society, as well as the degree and extent to which they are dominated by men, depends upon the various kinds of capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) that they possess. Thus, even though patriarchy is deeply rooted in the society, it operates (differently) based on the capital and associated power acquired by women" (p. 262, Soman 2009).*

Moreover, scholars have examined how gendered roles, identities, and power relations are produced in Indian society through socialisation, while also highlighting the potential for agency (choice, resistance, and transformation) within these structures.

Dube (1988) examines how family and kinship systems operate as organising frameworks in India, determining age- and gender-based divisions of labour, responsibilities, and social obligations (ibid.). While acknowledging the pervasive nature of socialisation, Dube contests the subject position of women as "passive victims" of such patriarchal conditioning:

> *"The social system characterised by gender asymmetry and the overall subordination of women (is) imbued with a certain givenness and appears as a part of the natural order of things. To state this, however, is not to argue that women are passive, unquestioning victims of these practices. It is within these limits that women question their situation, express resentment, use manipulative strategies, often against other women, turn self-denial into sources of power, and attempt to carve out a living space." (p. 18, Dube 1988)*

Similarly, Thapan (1995, 2001) examines the interplay between socialisation, determinism, free will, and (personal individual) agency in the construction of gendered identities in India. The scholar argues that since gender identity is socially constructed, it is flexible, open to change and holds the potential for resistance and transformation (p. 38, Thapan 1995).

Thapan continues:

> *"Women are undoubtedly socialised into conformity, compulsory heterosexuality and inevitable motherhood from very early on… Gender shapes and is inscribed on the subject (women) in everyday life both socially as well as through her own perception in contemporary urban India. The woman is clearly defined in terms of her bodily functions and, therefore, as an inextricable part of Nature. This perception of the woman's oppression being related to her embodiment cannot be denied… But such a perspective might, however, suggest a simplistic understanding of femininity as an outcome of patriarchal oppression wherein women, as gendered subjects, are the passive products of socialisation. It is not enough to simply state that it is patriarchy which creates this product because women are also involved in its production." (p. 32-36, Thapan 1995)*

Accordingly, Thapan (2001) demonstrates how women participate actively and creatively in constructing definitions of womanhood and femininity. Thapan considers mundane forms of everyday resistance, such as "alternative" styles and modes of dressing, through which women and men assert agency and challenge traditional gender norms, even if only on a personal level (p. 50, Thapan 1995). In doing so, the scholar suggests a "productive view of human agency where the woman is not merely a passive victim but also an agent of change" (p. 41, Thapan 1995). Thapan argues that while individuals are shaped by dominant social norms and values, these influences do not entirely determine or control them. According to the scholar, there is room for individuals to actively and creatively engage with the world around them. In this context, Thapan sheds light on the different ways in which middle-class elite women "consciously" formulate their own rules for conduct, appearance, and self-presentation within the complexities of a changing social context (Abstract, 2001).

Soman (2009) has paid attention to educated working women in the Information Technology (IT) sector in India (Kerala) to examine how women who hold cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital engage with patriarchal norms and socialisation. Although patriarchy is deeply embedded in society and limits people's choices and actions, Soman argues that it can also act as a flexible framework which provides space for improvising patriarchal norms depending on the social and economic capital women possess (p. 261-262, Soman 2009). Emphasising women's agency, Soman positions women as "active agents" of social change, capable of transforming both their lives and those of others (p. 270). Drawing from their empirical research, she argues that working women bypass patriarchal restrictions imposed on them by their families and by society at large. Soman contends these strategic choices can serve as a "prescriptive model" for redefining women's roles and status in society (ibid.)

This literature provides a critical framework for contextualising the socio-cultural milieu in which officers' wives of the Indian Army are situated in and engage with. Officers' wives predominantly belong to the English-speaking, educationally advantaged urban elite of India and often identify themselves as part of the 'new-modern India' described above.

Feminist International Relations

This study also engages with feminist critique of international relations (IR) and feminist security studies (FSS) as fields of inquiry (Tickner 1992; Chenoy 2000; Elshtain 1985; Runyan and Peterson 1991).

Realism and International Relations

Within the realm of international relations, feminist scholars have critically examined political realism. In this framework, states are regarded as "primary actors" with "interests and agency", whose success in the "anarchic" international system is measured by their ability to embody masculine traits, such as "strength, aggression, and independence", and to pursue self-interested policies, including the use of military force, and militarist policies to ensure their survival, legitimise national defence, and secure territorial autonomy (Runyan and Peterson 1991; Chenoy 2000; Tickner 1992, 2004).

Feminist international relations scholars such as J. Ann Tickner (1992, 1999), Anuradha Chenoy (2000, 2004), Anne Sisson Runyan, V. Spike Peterson (1991), and Jean Bethke Elshtain (1985) have contested realism as a patriarchal and androcentric discourse, challenging its foundational assumptions, epistemological commitments, and gendered silences.

Tickner (1992) has critiqued the core concepts and "detached" claims of realism, such as "power, anarchy, national interest, and security", arguing that while these concepts are presented as "objective", they are, in fact, "partial and incomplete". She contends that they are a "product of" and "privilege" masculine worldviews, presenting them as "universal" while "excluding" or "silencing" gendered and marginalised perspectives, situated experiences, and "alternative voices" in the theorisation of international relations and society more broadly (p. 17, Tickner, 1992). Moreover, she has highlighted the "close association" between masculinity and politics, illustrating how characteristics linked to hegemonic masculinity, such as "toughness, rationality, courage, power, independence, and physical strength", have historically been the "most valued" and "prioritised" in the political and public arena. These gendered traits are "projected" onto state behaviour, where a state's success, much like that of a man, is measured by its "capacity" to embody masculine attributes such as military force and strength in the name of "national security" and state sovereignty. As a result, Tickner concludes feminine voices and perspectives are often considered "inauthentic" and devalued, reinforcing the political and public spheres as masculine domains (p. 8, Tickner 1992).

Anne Sisson Runyan and V. Spike Peterson (1991) displace realism as a “patriarchal discourse” that constructs “woman” as the “other” — “irrational” and “disorderly”— in contrast to men, who are associated with “reason, rationality, and reality” (p. 85). They also dispute realism’s “central claim” to objectivity, arguing that realist concepts such as “power, security, and sovereignty” are not “neutral” but shaped by patriarchal-masculinist assumptions and gendered binaries such as “public/private, inside/outside, strong/weak, and male/female” (p. 70, Runyan and Peterson 1991). According to their critique, patriarchal thought, which “privileges” male experience, “masculinist ways of thinking and knowing”, and masculine traits like reason and control over feminine ones such as emotion and irrationality, shape the very foundations of realist thinking that dominates international relations theory, practice, and discipline (ibid.). They concluded how the “woman’ is “presented” in realist constructions as a “domesticated’ figure whose ‘feminine’ sensibilities are both at odds with and inconsequential to the harsh ‘realities’ of the public world of men and states” (p. 69, Runyan and Peterson 1991).

Jean Bethke Elshtain (1985) has also critically examined realism in international relations, particularly its tendency to normalise war and collective violence. She critiques realism’s ontological claims — especially the idea that sovereign states are “preposited entities” operating in an anarchic world system, seeking to “enhance and secure” political power. Elshtain has disputed realist and just war narratives for ignoring “human agency and identity” and for reinforcing gendered roles and identities in relation to war and violence. She argues that realism exaggerates certain aspects of human nature while “ignoring” others, particularly those associated with women and traditionally feminine perspectives. As a result, she contests realism as a “gendered and partial” narrative (p. 40-41, Elshtain 1985).

International relations scholars from the Global South, such as Chenoy (2004), have critiqued realist theories for accepting ideas such as the “use of force as a foundation of power”, the necessity of hierarchy in social organisation, and “dominance-submission as the basis of relationships”. According to the scholar, gendered assumptions and thinking contribute to the development of “muscular discourses” that not only shape policies of militarisation and influence both international and local politics but also define “power” in distinctly gendered — as a “masculine notion” (p. 31-33, Chenoy 2004).

In line with the above critique, Laura J. Shepherd (2010) challenges realist theory for portraying states as “self-interested, rational, and unified” actors whose behaviour is grounded in assumptions about “human nature”. She argues that this concept of human nature is gendered — shaped by masculine experiences and perspectives. Shepherd further points out that “men” appear in realist frameworks

only as “abstract, universal figures” rather than as embodied individuals and critiques such frameworks for ignoring how gender “informs and affects” the practices of global politics (p. 5, Shepherd 2010).

Feminist IR scholars have “displaced” realist theories and the “reality” they construct, critiquing their perceived claims to “objectivity”, their “state-centric” biases, and their privileging of masculine experiences and worldviews. Realism has been criticised for prioritising the state as the primary unit of analysis while simultaneously “devaluing, excluding, or ignoring” women’s lived experiences and alternative forms of political organisation. As a result, feminist critiques have identified and interrogated realism and the patriarchal ideologies embedded within it as key contributors to the gendered marginalisation and subordination of women in international and global politics (Runyan and Peterson 1991; Chenoy 2000; Tickner 1992).

In addition to identifying political realism as a contributing factor to gendered invisibility and subordination in the international political arena (Tickner 1992; Peterson 1991), scholars such as Shepherd, Tickner, and Peterson, alongside Maithreyi Krishnaraj (1996), Carol Cohn (1993), and Lauren Wilcox (2009), have also pointed to gender itself, particularly socially constructed ideas about gender that are perceived as natural and essential, as central to the continued marginalisation of women and the privileging of men and masculinity in the arenas of international relations, global politics, and society more broadly.

Shepherd (2010) has emphasised how gender is not only a “subject” in global politics but also a critical lens through which the discipline must be rethought. The “ambiguity” of the phrase “gender matters” reflects both a topic and an “epistemological belief” that gender as an “analytical” and “empirical” category fundamentally shapes international relations and political processes (p. 3, Shepherd 2010).

Krishnaraj (2006) critiques the lack of theoretical and methodological depth in much of women’s studies practice in India, particularly its over-reliance on empiricism and its insufficient interrogation of core concepts like “gender”, “patriarchy”, and “power”. She argues that gender can be understood in “multiple” ways: as an “analytical and relational category” and as an “ideology, social process, and social product”. Understood this way, Krishnaraj argues gender not only reflects “complex social processes” but also “structures” and reinforces “social hierarchies and relationships between men and women”, particularly the “sexual division of labour” within, and outside the ‘home’ (p. 4440-4441, Krishnaraj 2006).

In line with this, theorists have studied how certain attributes and characteristics[4] like physical strength, aggressiveness, force, and rationality have been typically associated with men and militarised masculinity or constructed (accepted) as "masculine cultural codes" or norms (Tickner 1992; Cohn 1993, Cohn et al. 2005; Eichler 2014; Krishnaraj 1996; Runyan and Peterson 2014, Peterson 2007). In contrast and in hierarchical opposition, other attributes or characteristics, such as weakness, vulnerability, passivity, and emotions, have been "naturally" associated with women or constructed (accepted) as "feminine cultural codes" or norms (ibid.).

Tickner (1992), for example, demonstrates how traits like "force, toughness, courage, bravery, aggression, physical strength, and rationality", along with their associations with the public sphere, are commonly linked to men and masculinity. In contrast, emotionality, subjectivity, irrationality, dependence, and ties to the private sphere are typically associated with women and femininity (p. 8-10). Cohn (2006) similarly argues that society tends to divide "human characteristics" into binary opposites, assigning them to men and women in "mutually exclusive" ways. As a result, individuals with "biologically male bodies" are often assumed to "naturally" possess masculine traits, while those with biologically female bodies are "biologically" associated with feminine traits (p. 1-2). Runyan and Peterson (1991, 2014) further contend that attributes such as rationality, strength, autonomy, and objectivity are "socially constructed" and privileged as masculine, while traits like emotionality, dependence, weakness, and subjectivity are constructed as feminine and consequently "devalued" (p. 68-69, 1991). Building on this critique, Eichler (2014) demonstrates how characteristics like toughness, aggression, courage, and dominance have historically been tied to men and militarised masculinity. In contrast, 'woman', and femininity is often represented through the image of vulnerable, idealised "beautiful souls" who require protection (p. 82-86).

These feminist constructivist scholars identify "essentialist" gendered perspectives, such as the belief that women are "biologically" or "inherently" non-violent, nurturing, more peaceful, and less aggressive, play a significant role in "structuring" gendered hierarchies, relations, divisions within "families and in societies writ large". These gendered stereotypes and assumptions, they argue, "sanction" the "dominant and political" roles of men in public and private arenas, making it seem "natural" for men to "govern" families and societies (p. 1-2, Cohn et al. 2005). As a result, men are

[4] For example, strength, power, autonomy, independence, self-reliance, rationality (Tickner 1992; 2004), reason, agency, objectivity (Peterson 2007), toughness, violence, aggression, courage, control, and domination (Eichler 2014; Cohn et al. 2005) have been accepted as masculine values, traits or characteristics (Krishnaraj 1996; Shepherd 2010; Wilcox 2009).

positioned as “heads of households” and are viewed as the legitimise holders of “political, economic, and cultural power” (p. 10, Krishnaraj 1996).

Tickner (1992) examines how gendered stereotypes, such as portraying women as “emotional, weak, fearful, indecisive, and dependent”, are used to “marginalise” them from military domains and policy frameworks (p. 8-9, Tickner 1992). Tickner (2004) argues that the common association of “women with peace” and the link between “pacifism and femininity” have been socially constructed to “disempower” women and exclude them from the perceived “real” world of international politics (p. 8, Tickner 2004). Similarly, Eichler (2014) has illustrated how the gendered “protector-protected” dichotomy has been constructed to “legitimise and sustain” gendered inequality in various arenas of public and private life (p. 83, Eichler, 2014). Krishnaraj (1996) also assesses how the association of “women with peace” functions as a “stereotype” that “legitimises” gendered exclusions from arenas of violence and politics” (p. 262, Krishnaraj 1996).

Cohn and others have highlighted how gendered metaphors and language act as a “pre-emptive deterrent” to “alternative ways of thinking” in disarmament discourse and decision-making surrounding weapons of mass destruction as these arenas are saturated with ideas about gender, where traits coded as “masculine” are “privileged” (p. 2-4, Cohn et al. 2005). Consequently, they note how “ideas, concerns, interests, information, feelings and meanings marked as feminine are devalued”, making them difficult to express or take seriously within the global political arena (p. 5, Cohn et al. 2005).

In paying attention to gender as an “analytical category”, feminist IR directed their analytical attention to gendered hierarchies — the “hierarchical construction” of gender differences (Tickner 1992; Runyan and Peterson 2014; Cohn et al. 2005)

Peterson (2007) has paid attention to “gendering” or “gender coding” and has helped understand how hierarchical biological understandings of “sex” and institutionalisation are “mutually constituted”:

> *“Most people most of the time take a categorical, essentialised distinction between male and female completely for granted; as biologically ‘given’, reproductively and psycho-socially ‘obvious’. Consequently, as an effect, the naturalness of sex difference is generalised to the naturalness of masculine privilege so that both aspects come to be taken for granted ‘givens’ of social life. The ‘natural’ inferiority of the feminine is invoked and plays a powerful, though not exhaustive, role in normalising and legitimising the marginalisation, subordination, and exploitation of feminised practices and persons.” (p. 14, Peterson 2007)*

Moreover, Peterson has developed the concept of "feminisation as devalorisation" to illustrate how "gendered (racial/class) hierarchies are normalised, naturalised, and depoliticised" by their "feminisation" (p. 11, Peterson 2007). The scholar notes:

> *"On the one hand, subordinated individuals or marginalised groups are devalorised by feminisation; depicted as lacking capacity, being weak, irrational, offensive or posing a danger. On the other hand, responding appropriately to such individuals or groups requires masculinised practices; these range from patronising and protectionist behaviours, disciplinary measures, and violent coercion." (p. 14, Peterson 2007)*

Peterson (2004) underscores how "gendering" functions as a "structural" feature of society, shaping not only individual men and women but also influencing how we speak, identify ourselves, and interact in everyday life. They highlight the "ideological, economic, cultural, and structural effects" of gender coding. Analytically, gendered assumptions structure divisions of "power, authority, and labour", determining whose "voices, labour, work, and experiences" are valued and legitimised (p. 40, Peterson 2004). Peterson highlights how qualities such as emotion or subjectivity are stigmatised as feminine and, therefore, devalued compared to masculine qualities like reason or objectivity (p. 13, Peterson 2007). In line with this, Runyan and Peterson (1991) examine how "women's work" and activities are typically associated with the private and domestic sphere, such as caregiving and household management. These gendered contributions are often devalued, deemed "economically irrelevant", and constructed as "natural, voluntary, or unskilled" work — rather than recognised as legitimate, "real", "paid" labour. Such gendered framings of women as primary "providers" of devalued domestic work "weakens" their position within "wage labour markets" as they dominate lower-paid caregiving and service sectors and professions. Consequently, Runyan and Peterson highlight how constructed gendered hierarchies contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of "male power both within the household and the world generally" (p. 88-90, Runyan and Peterson 1991).

Similarly, Cohn et al. (2005) have exposed how constructed ideas about gender and "symbolic" masculine or feminine "coding" influence not only our perceptions of men and women but also shape how we interpret and understand the world. They examine the "political effects" of gendering, emphasising how gendered constructions shape national security discourses and concepts of effective disarmament. Their analysis underscores how even at a "subconscious level", "actions and endeavours" coded as masculine are "highly valued". At the same time, those perceived as feminine are consequently "devalued" within social and political life (p. 1-3, Cohn et al. 2005).

Feminist international relations (IR) theorists identify constructed gendered hierarchies as a significant contributor to the marginalisation and subordination of women in international and global politics. Runyan and Peterson (2014) expose how gender coding plays a critical role in "naturalising, depoliticising, and normalising" gendered power relations — not only between women and men but also among "states, cultures, institutions, policies, practices, and even ideas and perspectives within the global system" (p. 17, Runyan and Peterson 2014). They conclude gender coding constructs and perpetuates gendered inequalities in society writ large, reinforcing the "political and dominant" role of men in public and private arenas (p. 6-7, Runyan and Peterson 2014).

In another work, Peterson concludes:

> *"The common sense of privileging the masculine and devaluing the feminine reproduce(s) inequalities as if this were natural and inevitable, thus making critique and resistance difficult. In short, devalorising the feminine produces even as it obscures vast inequalities of power, authority, and resource distribution." (p. 15, Peterson 2007)*

In the same vein, Tickner contends, the "elimination" of gendered hierarchies, those that "privilege" masculine characteristics, knowledge and experiences, is essential to dismantling gendered marginalisation and inequality in the political-public arena (p. 9, Tickner 1992).

Lastly, feminist IR scholars have highlighted the "private-public dichotomy" as a cause contributing to gendered inequality within the field of international relations (Peterson 2000; Enloe 2014; Chenoy 2000; Krishnaraj 2009). Peterson (2000) discusses how society often frames and associates the "public" sphere, such as government and state, with masculine traits such as "politics, reason, order, and autonomy" (p. 17). In contrast, the "private" arena is associated with "family and household" matters and is deemed a feminine space. This "public-private dichotomy" upholds and reproduces gendered hierarchies "privileges and legitimises" what is coded as masculine over what is feminised, and consequently "structured" thought processes, worldviews, and social and political arenas of everyday life (p. 16-17, Peterson 2000).

Cynthia Enloe (2000, 2014, 2016) has served as an exemplar in this context, theoretically and empirically illustrating how the "personal" and the "private" are "political" and "international" (p. 195, Enloe, 2000). Enloe critiques how traditional IR scholars and policymakers associate women and femininity with the "private" "domestic" sphere and simultaneously dismiss, devalue, and treat these feminine spaces as "trivial" and "marginal" to political and social analysis. Enloe contends that the domestic roles women perform within private and personal spaces of their homes and families are

crucial to and foundational to maintaining and constructing the public domain of men and states. Similarly, Chenoy (2000) argues women's association with domesticity and the private arena has been constructed and reproduced to uphold gendered invisibility in the public-political arena (p. 17- 20). According to Krishnaraj (2009), notions of "citizenship" are shaped by this specific gendered dichotomy as women's association with apolitical domestic spaces obscures their lived realities, reinforces their marginalisation as political actors, and "intrinsically excludes" them from public life (p. 44).

To summarise, feminist IR theorists have critiqued and challenged masculinist and patriarchal realist doctrines, essentialist ideologies, and socially constructed notions of gender, exposing their role in shaping international relations and global politics as masculine domains. Scholars have highlighted how realist frameworks, essentialist assumptions, gendered hierarchies, and dichotomies and their wielding by states, militaries, policymakers, and political actors produce and sustain gendered inequality, subordination, and marginalisation in society at large. Feminist scholars have been at the forefront of dismantling these dominant paradigms, exposing their patriarchal and gendered nature and their role in constructing and reproducing gendered inequality and marginalisation in the arenas of international relations and global politics.

This study engages with and builds on feminist IR scholarship by shifting the analytical focus to the officers' wives of the Indian Army. It examines the intersections of political realism, essentialist gender assumptions, gendered hierarchies, and the worldviews of officers' wives, investigating the empirical application of these frameworks as "rationales" to "make sense of" and interpret practices of militarisation, militarist policies, and broader socio-cultural ideologies (Hyde 2015). In doing so, the research foregrounds the capacity and potential of gendered labour to both expand and complicate feminist critiques of dominant frameworks within international relations, including realist thinking, essentialist gender constructions, gendered hierarchies, and dichotomies. This thesis also investigates the role of gendered labour in the maintenance and reproduction of masculinity's privileged status within families, institutions, and society more broadly.

Feminist Security Studies

In line with feminist IR, this study also engages with the discipline of feminist security studies (FSS). Scholars such as Rita Manchanda (2001) and Chenoy (2000) have critiqued realism and its role in shaping the foundational assumptions, epistemological orientations, and gendered exclusions within the larger security arena.

Manchanda has evaluated how, in Southeast Asia, security doctrines and paradigms remain "state-centric" and are "ideologically" rooted in realist and neo-realist theories. She critiques military and defence domains for constructing "military fixated", "gendered", and "elitist" understandings of security — those that conceptualise security as "national" security and rely primarily on military strength to counter external and internal armed threats against state sovereignty or territorial integrity. Manchanda emphasises the need to "widen the notion of security, emphasising sustainable development, social justice, human rights, gender equality, and democracy" (p. 1956-1957, Manchanda 2001).

On similar lines, Chenoy has exposed how realist and neo-realist "orthodoxy" continues to dominate national security discourse and the discipline of international relations. Security threats and discourses have been critiqued for conceptualising security from a "state-centric" perspective and defining it in "militarist terms" — focusing on "military power", the use of force, and displays of strength to ensure "national defence", state survival, and territorial sovereignty. Chenoy challenges realists for accepting and framing national security as the "paramount" priority of the modern nation and for treating state security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity as the "basis" for shaping foreign policy and conducting international relations (p. 22, Chenoy 2000). In critiquing the inherent gender bias in realist and security frameworks, Chenoy exposes how gender is either ignored entirely or the subordination of women is treated as "natural, inevitable, and necessary". She notes how women are not only "excluded" from dominant definitions of "political actors" but are also portrayed as the "other" — as "outsiders" who are "vulnerable" and "dependent" on masculine "protectors" (p. 17-20, p. 28, Chenoy 2000).

Manchanda and Chenoy have consequently recognised realism as a cause for women's invisibility from the dominant masculine security doctrine. Manchanda challenged realists for "privileging" masculine and state-centric perspectives while "ignoring social structures, marginalised groups, and non-state actors" (p. 1956, Manchanda 2001). Chenoy similarly critiques the masculinist nature of realist security logic, arguing that traditional state-centric frameworks systematically exclude and marginalise women, the feminine, and their concerns in the construction of security doctrines (Chenoy 2000).

Laura Sjoberg (2009, 2010), Lene Hansen (2014), and others (Cohn 1993), echoing the broader tradition of FSS, have highlighted the intricate relationship between analytical gender and the larger security doctrine.

Sjoberg (2009) has directed attention to the key themes of FSS and helped understand how social constructions of gender shape the theory and practice of international security. FSS scholars examine how gender is "essential" to how security threats and concerns are conceptualised and understood. They expose how masculine values are "prized" and underpin "core" concepts in the discipline, such as the "state, war, violence, peace, and security", while gendered hierarchies and binary thinking shape how policymakers and scholars frame security practices and issues. Consequently, feminists argue security doctrines, frameworks, and practices construct and rely on the "invisibility of women specifically and gender generally" (p. 199-200, Sjoberg 2009).

Hansen (2000) critiques the Copenhagen School for excluding gender in its theory of securitisation. She identifies two reasons why gendered security issues often go unrecognised: "security as silence" and "subsuming security". The first refers to situations where people cannot speak about ("voice") their insecurity because doing so might "aggravate" the threat they face. For example, women facing honour killings in Pakistan may "paradoxically" face threats by their own society and family members if they attempt to draw attention to their fears. The second reason is that gendered threats "rarely" produce clearly defined collective identity groups, those required by the Copenhagen School. As a result of this, Hansen argues, complex insecurities, shaped by intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality, are often excluded from traditional security analysis and frameworks (p. 287-88, Hansen 2000).

Cohn (1993) highlights how gendered assumptions, metaphors, and language shape the supposedly "objective" national security discourse in the United States — specifically, how security experts "think" and "talk" about security. She argues that security doctrines are inherently gendered, as they "value" and prioritise masculine traits such as "toughness, aggression, and the use of force" while "systematically" excluding and devaluing qualities "marked" as feminine, such as "emotion, vulnerability, and human subjectivity" (p. 239-242, Cohn 1993).

Moreover, scholars such as Sjoberg (reflecting broader FSS scholarship) and Chenoy "question" and "interrogate" the "extent" or degree to which women are protected or "secured" by the state and associated institutions such as the military. Sjoberg critiques the state for being a "misleading construction" as she argues that while it presents itself as a "protector" of its citizens, it "often perpetuates the subordination of women" (p. 197, Sjoberg 2009). Similarly, Chenoy challenges

"realist" conceptualisations of states as "primary providers" of security and their framing as "protectors" of the nation-state, securing it from foreign threats and domestic instabilities (p. 22, Chenoy 2000). She exposes how states instead construct and formalise "patriarchal" structures, relations, and "male domination" (p. 19-20, Chenoy 2000).

Lastly, critical feminist scholars have applied gender as an analytical lens to broaden realist, masculinist, state-centric security doctrines and to conceptualise more comprehensive and multidimensional understandings of security concerns, threats, and practices (Sjoberg 2009; Tickner 1992; Manchanda 2001; Chenoy 2000; Hansen 2000). In line with Feminist IR, FSS scholars have underscored how the "personal is international" and the "international is personal" — meaning that individual security is shaped by domestic and global politics and that international relations impact the security of individuals in the "everyday" and at the "local level" (p. 198-199, Sjoberg 2009). Building on this insight, FSS scholars define security in "multilevel" terms, including insecurities related to war and state-militarised violence, as well as "domestic violence, gender subordination, and ecological destruction" (ibid.).

For example, Tickner (2001) has critiqued traditional security doctrines for reproducing patriarchal realist assumptions, prioritising military concerns, national defence, and state survival. She reconceptualises security from a "multidimensional" feminist perspective — one that considers the security of states alongside that of individuals and communities. Tickner argues that this broader perspective allows us to "move away" from an "exclusive" focus on military issues to address a wider range of violence, including gendered, structural, and environmental forms (p. 577, Tickner 2001).

Manchanda "feminised" and "democratised" realist-state centric notions of security by advancing a "human security discourse" that widens the meaning of security to "integrate" people's everyday perspectives "on what actually constitutes security", gendered experiences of providing daily security in mundane ways, and principles of "social justice, human rights, gender equality, and democracy" (p. 1956-1957, Manchanda 2001).

Chenoy has highlighted how feminist and peace movements have "broadened" and "replaced" militarised notions and paradigms of security to include aspects of "human security" that centre the "needs, rights, and entitlements" of marginalised individuals and uphold principles of "social justice, political liberty, and equality" (p.11, Chenoy 2012).

Hansen critiques the emphasis on "speech" acts in defining and conceptualising security concerns and threats, arguing that this narrow focus makes it difficult to recognise "potential subjects of (in)security" — individuals or groups who have "no, or limited, possibility" to voice ("speak") their

insecurity. She emphasises the need to include gendered "silences" and "insecurities" into the security optic (p. 294-304, Hansen 2000).

Moreover, while acknowledging the crucial role of structural institutionalisation and socialisation in reinforcing realist perspectives, essentialist gendered assumptions, and the public–private dichotomy, Enloe (2014) and Collen Burke (1993) emphasise the potential for transforming these patriarchal institutional and discourses.

Enloe (2014) argues that patriarchal systems of international relations often make individuals feel as though they are merely being acted upon. However, she proposes an alternative way of engaging with international politics — one that involves recognising oneself as an active participant rather than a passive subject shaped by global state and military structures. This, she suggests, requires rethinking the boundaries of what counts as "international" and "political" and understanding how personal choices — such as family dynamics, consumer habits, travel decisions, and worldviews — contribute to shaping global realities (ibid.). Enloe acknowledges that recognising oneself as an international actor can be unsettling, especially when it reveals one's complicity in sustaining unequal hierarchical power systems. Nevertheless, she concludes that this kind of self-reflection and acknowledgement can make the global system appear less rigid and more open to transformative change than commonly assumed (p. 35-36, Enloe 2014).

Burke (1993) has similarly highlighted how "gender-specific roles" and "gender systems of domination and subordination" are not fixed but, rather, are constructed through socialisation and perpetuated through unjust state, military, political and economic structures (p. 7, Burke 1993). Burke notes men and women are socialised to have different attitudes towards war and aggression, and social, economic, and political structures reinforce this. Boys are socialised and encouraged (in schools and families) to demonstrate "competition, aggression, and not showing 'weak' emotions. Girls are socialised to accept attitudes of compromise, accommodation, and submission" (p. 6-8, Burke 1993). Burke emphasises the need for "changing socialisation" that constructs gender systems. While acknowledging that challenging socialisation was "a daunting task", Burke does not think it is impossible (p. 17, Burke 1993):

> "*Changing this process of socialisation is a daunting task, but it is not without hope. We must look at gender stereotypes and see how these values and behaviours get passed along from generation to generation. Once we can identify these processes, we are able to work for change. Clearly, education is the key, and women can take a lead in this. In most situations, women are still the primary caregivers for their children and, as such, can become educators*

for peace. As mothers, teachers, and members of communities, we can teach boys and girls to be cooperative rather than competitive, assertive rather than aggressive. We can teach boys to see girls as equals, not as weaker versions of themselves who need protection and merit scorn." (ibid.)

In this context, Burke further argues as women are greatly affected by ideologies of militarism and patriarchy, they must disarm and question such practices and demand the feminisation of the notion of (national) security" (ibid.).

The empirical narratives of officers' wives offer, once again, a compelling case for analysing the significance of gendered labour in both problematising and expanding feminist theorisation of security. While feminist security studies (FSS) scholars have extensively critiqued realism for its patriarchal epistemology and its exclusion of gendered experiences, much of this critique tends to position women as external to, or marginalised by, dominant security discourse and practice. This study shifts the analytical focus to the wives of Indian Army officers to examine how gendered labour sustains, complicates, or contests state-centric, realist, and gendered notions of security.

Gender and the Military

Finally, this study engages with literature that has theorised the intricate relationship between gender, the military apparatus, and processes of militarisation.

Existing theorisation has identified the military as a gendered organisation, shaped by "dominant masculine cultures" and structured in ways that construct and "legitimise" gendered roles, divisions, and inequality (p. 109, Carreiras 2006; see also Enloe 2000; Elshtain 1985; Chowdhry 2010). In particular, theorists have highlighted gender as a central feature of military structures, cultures, and socialisation, particularly through analyses of structural gendered exclusions in combat (King 2017; Eichler 2014). They contend the "intimate" link between masculinity, combat, soldiering, and the military has been "socially constructed" for the "purpose of waging war", "preserve patriarchy", and legitimise and construct gendered inequality in society more generally (p. 81-82, Eichler 2014).

For example, Galia Golan (1997) has critiqued the military as a "patriarchal institution" that plays a "central" and "socialising" role in perpetuating women as "subordinate", "vulnerable", feminine figures and "in need of protection" (p. 581-582). In paying attention to the exclusion of women from serving in combat positions in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Golan has highlighted how military training, cultures, and structures nurture, "inculcate" and "venerate" traits such as "strength, force, aggression, and bravery" — attributes that are overwhelmingly associated with masculinity and accepted as stereotypical male characteristics within military culture (p. 583, 1997). Moreover, they highlight how militaries construct men as natural "defenders" and frame their role as a "special and critical" role in society who may be "called upon" to make the "ultimate sacrifice for society's benefit and safety" (ibid.). Consequently, Golan exposes how men's dominant role in the army and their association with combat (from which women are barred) plays a critical role in defining the masculine as "more valuable" and "essential" to society (Golan 1997).

Tami Jacoby has similarly highlighted "formal" barriers and "intangible" pressures such as military policy and cultural norms women face in advancing in the Israeli combat corps (p. 88-90, Jacoby 2010). The military, according to Jacoby, reproduces and upholds "stereotypical and chauvinistic" attitudes, claiming gendered presence could "obstruct" male camaraderie (p. 86, Jacoby 2010). In discussing the implications of women's "right to fight" in the Israeli army, Jacoby highlights gendered inclusion in military structures does not destabilise patriarchal norms, "masculine 'givens'" of the military system, and women's inevitable and natural association with the private arena. Jacoby contends women's advancement and comprehensive inclusion in combat arms of military service "depends" on their ability to control military conditions and policy and promote gendered rights in masculine spaces (p. 90, Jacoby 2010).

Prem Chowdhry (2010, 2014) has paid attention to the Indian Army and its continued exclusion of women from combat roles. Women have been allowed to serve in non-combat areas such as medicine, engineering, signals, intelligence, and other fields since the early 1990s and have been eligible for Permanent Commission since 2015. However, they are still not permitted to serve in combat arms like the infantry, armoured corps, mechanised infantry, or artillery. According to Chowdhry, the Indian Army remains deeply "gendered", as it perceives "fighting", by "nature", as a male occupation and constructs "combat" as "exclusive" masculine spaces (p. 18-19, Chowdhry 2010).

Furthermore, they highlight gendered exclusions are "cultural, ideological, and structural" as they are rooted in military policy, essentialist gendered perspectives and patriarchal beliefs that uphold women's "natural" association with family and domesticity. Officers of the Indian Army, according to their study, perceive women in combat as a "threat" that could potentially "undermine" masculine ethos, bonhomie, and camaraderie, which was deemed to be a matter of military effectiveness and discipline. Chowdhry notes how women being "in charge of men" is perceived by most men in the army and society more broadly as "transgressive" and "unnatural". They argue notions of masculinity and femininity have been "constructed" in the Indian armed forces to "preserve" the masculinity of the army and to "reinforce" gender divisions that exist in the civilian society between men and women (ibid.).

Existing theorisation, in other words, has highlighted the role that cultural discourses, gendered stereotypes (biological reasoning, pregnancy, menstruation, and upper-body strength), and essentialist perspectives have played in legitimising and maintaining gendered exclusions from military structures (Golan 1997; Jacoby 2010; Chowdhry 2010; see also King 2017).

In addition to exploring women's empirical visibility from military structures, scholars have also explored how gender shapes broader processes of militarisation (Basham and Bulmer 2017; Wilcox 2009; Sjoberg 2010; Burke 1993; Chenoy 2004, 2012).

Victoria M. Basham and Sarah Bulmer (2017) highlight how the processes and practices of militarisation are gendered, shaped by and reliant on "heteronormative discourses" and essentialist gender assumptions. They note how militaries construct these "gendered identities" by typically associating men and masculinity with "war, soldiering, and violence", framing them as the "protectors" of women. In sharp contrast, women and femininity are linked to stereotypical roles involving "nurturing, the home front, and the reproduction of the nation" (p. 59-60, Basham and Bulmer 2017).

Lauren Wilcox has highlighted how gendered assumptions, ideologies, and identities shape military doctrine and strategy and are critical in explaining the "cult of the offensive" — why states and militaries "prefer" offensive strategies over defensive approaches. She outlines how offence has been constructed as masculine and associated with traits such as "aggression, strength, and boldness" (p. 228, Wilcox 2009). In contrast, defence has been gendered feminine and associated with "passivity, weakness, and victimhood" — traits accepted as feminine. Wilcox exposes how, in the international arena, offensive strategies are "preferred" because of their association with masculinity, while defensive strategies are considered "weak and unmanly". Not only is the success of states as international actors and the degree to which states are "valorised" in the international arena shaped by their ability to embody and project "masculine behaviour", Wilcox contends, "resistance" to militarist responses by states, militaries, and political leaders is "coded" as feminine or "cowardly" (p. 228-30, Wilcox 2009).

Sjoberg draws on Elshtain's concepts of the "just warrior" and "beautiful soul" and sheds light on the "continued presence" and "contemporary evolution" of such gendered ideologies in the United States (p. 209, Sjoberg in Sjoberg and Via 2010). Sjoberg is critical of how, despite the fact that American women have been "extraordinarily brave" in armed conflict and taken part in violent activities, the US military and the media continue to depict women's role in wars and conflict through gendered narratives and reproduce a "stereotypical" and "idealised" image of "militarised" women as "defenceless" "victims" 'in need of protection' (p. 212-215, Sjoberg 2010). In contrast, Sjoberg notes, military men are framed as "men of valour" who pursue legitimate force and wield violence to "protect" their homes, families, and homelands. Sjoberg concludes such gendered identity constructions and protector-protected gendered ideologies are central to maintaining masculine and state legitimacy in global politics (ibid.).

Colleen Burke (1994), while defining militarisation as the "gradual encroachment of the military institution into the civilian arenas", makes a gender analysis to highlight the "effect" of "militarist ideologies", responses, and policies on women around the world (p. 1-2). Burke shows how the processes of militarisation and patriarchy are "inextricably linked", as militaries are not only "built on" rigid masculine codes and gendered roles but military institutions play a central role through "indoctrination" and "training" in constructing and justifying "masculine dominance" and "women's marginalisation" (p. 5-6, Burke 1994).

Military recruitment, Burke argues, "demands" and "emphasises" stereotypical masculine attributes like aggressiveness, bravery, endurance, and discipline and simultaneously "belittles" feminine traits of "compassion and cooperation" (ibid.). Militaries "define" and construct "soldiers" and "real" men

as “strong, brave, and aggressive” in opposition to women who are deemed “weak, passive, and in need of protection” (ibid.). Moreover, Burke exposes how the process of militarisation and militarist policies are “legitimised” and “perpetuated” formally through government propaganda and “more subtly” through popular culture and media representations, which glorify military exploits (p. 3, Burke 1994).

Burke makes a critical assessment. She contends the “militarisation of a society” is difficult to achieve without the “compliance” of its population. Society at large, according to Burke, “promotes” gendered hierarchies, accepts militarised violence as “legitimate” and necessary for resolving conflict, and supports constructed gendered roles as “natural”. It is the “internalisation” of these gendered values and militarist beliefs by society that upholds militarism in society writ large. Critical of how militarisation “restricts” and “marginalises” women holding “power” and occupying “decision-making positions”, Burke encourages women to be critical of and “disarm” both patriarchy and militarism — “patriarchal militarism” (p. 7, Burke 1994).

Chenoy (2012) provides a critical intervention into debates on gender and militarisation by examining militarisation and militarism in India. Chenoy contests the widespread assumption that India is not a militarised state by highlighting “militarist policies and responses” the Indian state employs as it engages with regions such as the Northeast and Kashmir and “manages” (“represses”) Naxalite or Khalistan secessionist movements (p. 1, Chenoy 2012). Militarism in India, according to Chenoy, is driven by and rooted in realist doctrines — those that prioritise national security, “privilege” masculine experiences and “devalue” or “exclude” gendered perspectives and identities (p. 10, Chenoy 2012). In this context, Chenoy has directed attention to policies of state-centric militarisation as causes for women’s exclusion from decision-making positions in the larger security doctrine and the military arena and stressed the need for women to challenge practices of militarisation, national security paradigms, and realist conceptions of “power, conflict, and dissent” (p. 11, Chenoy 2012).

In another work, Chenoy (2004) highlighted how practices and policies of militarisation uphold and reproduce patriarchal notions and a “muscular discourse” that not only “marginalises opposition, diversity, and difference” but also endorses gendered roles, divisions and binary categories like “with us” or “against us” (p. 14). Lastly, for Chenoy, a “major challenge” to feminist thinking is the perception that when women “accept militarist notions of power”, it is arguably “easier” for them to become a part of masculine security and state institutions (ibid.). In this context, Chenoy positions the women cadre of right-wing organisations, such as the Sangh Parivar, as agents of militarisation in civil society who uphold and reproduce militant nationalism. She explores the reasons why these women become militarised and argues that women adopt militarist ideas, support aggressive policies, and patriarchal

power structures, to become a part of national security and state institutions, gain agency and influence (p. 36, Chenoy 2004):

> *"Women get militarised and accept the use of force to derive agency, even though it is women who suffer from it the most. They believe that they too can achieve a position of power if they use the instruments of masculinity, even though it means hurting women and maintaining status through the use of force." (ibid.)*

Identifying this as a significant challenge to feminist thought and values. Chenoy highlights women's roles through peace and feminist movements in deconstructing the ideologies of militarism and patriarchy and in changing the notion of national security to the more "inclusive concept of human security" (ibid.).

In line with Chenoy and the particular context of India, scholars have made a gendered analysis of militarisation and explored women's relationship to military power, control, or presence from a state-centric perspective (Shekhawat 2015; Parashar 2011, 2020).

State-Centric Militarisation

Scholars have examined the impact of militarisation — military power, presence, or control — on women in conflict zones and militarised regions, such as Kashmir (Batool et al. 2016; Qutab 2012; Butalia 2002; Kazi 2007; Hamid et al. 2021; D'Souza 2016).

For instance, Urvashi Butalia (2002) has investigated the effect of the decade-long armed conflict in Kashmir on women's livelihoods and living environments. Essar Batool (et al. 2016) has examined the long-term impact of trauma on young Kashmiri women as survivors of rape as a result of coercive military presence. Seema Kazi (2007) has similarly exposed the effects of militarisation on women in Kashmir. Kazi's research reveals how the "masculinist social environment generated by militarisation renders women vulnerable to sexual violence, heightens women's economic insecurity, and reinforces women's political marginalisation" (p. 35). Soudiya Qutab (2012) and others (D'Souza 2016; Hamid et al. 2021) have directed their attention to the "half-widows" of Kashmir, to women whose husbands are missing as a result of ongoing conflict and militarisation. These scholars have investigated women's "liminal" or "limbo" "status" and the economic, legal, social, and psychological challenges women face as a result of both militarisation and the cultural context of the region (Qutab 2012; D'Souza 2016; Hamid et al. 2021).

Critical of how the "masculine experience" of militarisation was treated as "the dominant and valid experience" and of how states, militaries, and state security actors (men) were accepted as "subjects of knowledge" concerning militarisation (p. 18, Kazi 2007), feminist and gender theorists directed their attention to "gendered forms of resistance". They investigated the multiple ways in which women resisted militarisation — military power, control, and presence as "conscientious agents" rather than "victims" (Shekhawat 2015; Parashar 2011, 2020; Malik 2015, 2018; Sobhrajani 2014).

Seema Shekhawat (2015) and Swati Parashar (2009, 2011, 2020) have examined women's relationship to political violence as a response to militarisation. Shekhawat investigated women's roles as "contributors, motivators, facilitators, and stakeholders" of militancy and the critical role they played in "sustaining the conflict and aiding the militant movement" in response to the militarisation of their lives. Along similar lines, Parashar has explored women's violent activities and the multiple political and militant roles women took up as "perpetrators, planners, and patrons of religious-political militancy" in Kashmir as a response to militarisation.

Ishah Malik (2018) analysed gendered funerary processions and gendered cultures of grieving in Kashmir. Malik has contended women "publicising grief" represented the "agential political power of women" and gendered resistance to state sovereignty and militarisation. In another work, Malik

(2015) explored women's "active role" in the armed struggle and how women have challenged both the Indian state and its patriarchy of militarism. Manisha Sobhrajani (2014) has similarly examined women as "mothers, daughters, widows, fighters, martyrs, and mujahids" and their resilience in the armed conflict in Kashmir.

Furthermore, scholars such as Leigh Spanner (2022) and Enloe (2014), amongst others (Harrison and Laliberté 1993; Segal 1986; Hyde 2015), have investigated the militarisation of women's lives in the context of Global North militaries. Existing literature has directed attention to the strategies, manoeuvres, policies, and programmes of militarisation utilised by states, militaries, military commanders, and policymakers to "inculcate" loyalty and support of military spouses.

For example, Spanner (2022) has examined how the Canadian Armed Forces employ neoliberal ideas and qualities such as "individual responsibility, resilience, flexibility and resourcefulness" as "strategies" to "secure" the labour and loyalty of military spouses in support of operational effectiveness (p. 234).

Along similar lines, Enloe (2000) has investigated the "subtle and complex" "manoeuvres" utilised by states, militaries, and military commanders to gain the loyalty of and encourage different groups of civilian women (mothers, wives, nurses, factory workers, and prostitutes) to invest their labour in military institutions and conform to military expectations. For example, Enloe has highlighted how the military constructs and presents itself as "a family" or as a "benevolent benefactor" that provides its personnel with a sense of belonging, economic stability, and a range of "symbolic and material privileges". This framing is wielded by states, militaries and military personnel to "compel" women married to soldiers serving in a state's military to invest their "voluntary" physical, emotional, and domestic "unpaid" labour in the state apparatus for operational and military effectiveness (p. 156-161, Enloe 2000).

Deborah Harrison and Lucie Laliberté (1993) similarly highlight how the Canadian military presents itself as a "benevolent family" that "takes care of its own people" and promotes a sense of collective belonging and "family feeling" as an incentive to gain the support and complicity of women (military spouses) (p. 46-49, Harrison and Laliberte 1993). Alexandra Hyde has similarly explored how the British military constructs the notion of the "regimental family" to promote a sense of collective belonging among its personnel and as a means to secure the labour and loyalty of civilian women married to soldiers serving in the British Army (p. 75, Hyde 2015).

This study engages with the above theorisation of the gender and military nexus by adopting an ontological and analytical shift from macro-level institutional analysis. It explores the political

significance of gendered labour, examining how officers' wives — women who live in close proximity to women in combat — perceive gendered exclusions within military structures. Moreover, the research extends the existing literature by investigating (highlighting) how officers' wives of the Indian Army invoke institutional rhetoric that frames the military as a familial unit or a benevolent benefactor on their own accord and voluntarily as frameworks to engage with military practices, policies, and expectations. In doing so, this study explores how relatively privileged and educated women situated within elite sections of Indian society and the military interpret the Indian Army (and society), including whether and how they perceive these institutions as patriarchal.

Moreover, the study expands upon existing gendered analysis of state-centric militarisation (Duschinski 2009; Kazi 2007; Shekhawat 2015; Parashar 2011, 2020) and FSS studies (Sjoberg 2009; Manchanda 2001; Chenoy 2000) by making an important original contribution.

It investigates gendered political labour — how women who share close proximity to armed conflict zones and men in combat — perceive and interpret the Indian Army's presence in areas designated by the Indian state as "disturbed" or classified as "states of emergency", such as Kashmir, how they 'make sense of' specific military provisions like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), and how they engage with allegations of the Indian army's misuse of special powers. In doing so, the study expands upon existing theorisation that has challenged essentialist discourses that unreflectively link women, the feminine and femininity with peace and pacifism (Sjoberg 2009; Eichler 2014; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007).

Specifically, within the Indian context, scholars have contested women's advocacy of and association with pacifism by paying attention to women who are part of right-wing organisations and their participation in political violence (Banerjee 2003, 2006; Bacchetta 1993; Bacchetta and Power 2002; Sarkar 1993). Additionally, scholars have explored the role of women in sustaining and perpetuating militant movements and armed militancy (Shekhawat 2015; Parashar 2011; Malik 2015). This study pays attention to women who are uniquely positioned and share proximity to the operations of military power in conflict-affected areas such as Kashmir. Yet, they remain formally outside these military (combat) and conflict spaces. It explores the political significance of gendered labour in legitimising, normalising or critiquing militarist responses and coercive military presence and control in civilian spaces.

In summary, this study shifts the analytical focus to the socio-political labour of officers' wives and brings together insights from cultural studies, feminist international relations (IR), feminist security studies (FSS), and literature on the gender-military nexus to examine how women engage with and

'make sense of' the military apparatus and the broader socio-cultural milieu they are a part of. It explores the empirical application of concepts and ideologies that cultural studies, feminist IR, and FSS scholars have critiqued, examining how officers' wives employ or wield realist thinking, essentialist gender assumptions, constructed gender hierarchies, gendering, and state-centric, masculinist notions of security as logics, rationales, or tools for understanding and engaging with the Indian Army and Indian society. In doing so, this work foregrounds the political and analytical significance of gendered labour in both reproducing and problematising feminist critiques of militarisation, securitisation, and patriarchy.

Chapter Three: The Military Wife

In making a gendered analysis of militarisation, scholars have extensively documented the different ways in which militaries construct servicemen and the women married to them as "gendered subjects" (p. 229, Gray 2017; Enloe 2000; Basham and Bulmer 2017).

Enloe has exposed how practices of militarisation and the "privileging" of masculinity are not rooted in ambiguous "tradition or culture" but are products of "deliberate", "explicit", and "traceable" decisions and "conscious" thought made within a country's political system (p. 33-35, Enloe 2000). In line with this, Enloe has convincingly established how women's myriad relationships to military practices and policies, including their specific roles and identities as military wives, are shaped by informal decisions taken by military personnel and are an outcome of official military memos (p. 34-35, Enloe 2000; Enloe 2014).

Along similar lines, Cristina Rodrigues da Silva (2017) has examined the relationship between family and the Army in Brazil and established how the institution explicitly intervenes in the lives of military families by defining distinct and clear "rules and provisions" for men and women within the organisation (p. 214, da Silva 2017). Focusing on the experiences of Brazilian military wives, da Silva highlights the specific "obligations and behaviours" expected of the military wife. These include frequent geographic relocation, "distancing" from their families of origin, and being responsible for the private sphere — managing the household and familial relationships. Military wives are also expected to lead or participate in charitable activities, take on a public-facing role, remain "vigilant" about their own and other wives' actions and behaviour (e.g., how they dress and what they talk about) to "preserve" their husbands' reputations (p. 213-214). Da Silva further highlights how the "personal and professional" lives of military personnel "coexist" and are "directly" connected. The military wife, even if she works "outside the home" and takes part in paid labour, is expected to uphold the gendered division of labour, participate in philanthropic activities within the military, and foster "convivial relationships" with other military wives on the base (p. 223, da Silva 2017).

Similarly, Segal (1986) has drawn attention to how a military husband's rank and appointment defines American officers' wives' "roles, obligations, and benefits". Segal assesses that most military spouses are required to "perform" gendered familial roles, "adapt" to the demands of military life, relocate frequently, and "endure separations" (p. 22-24, Segal 1986). Officers' wives, specifically, are required to conform to more "prescriptive" obligations and pressures compared to the wives of enlisted personnel. They are expected to participate in social obligations, community and volunteer activities, "refrain from 'troublesome' behaviour", and uphold "military customs, rank courtesy, and etiquette".

Moreover, Segal also underscores the gendered dynamics unique to the military apparatus — the blurring of the private and public lives of military wives. Military wives are "aware" that their "behaviours" and actions are "under scrutiny" and that the "degree to which they conform to normative prescriptions can affect the service member's career advancement" (ibid.).

Harriet Gray (2017), through an analysis of published, non-fictional accounts written by women about their experiences of being married to a male serving member of the British armed forces, identified "key forms of labour" performed by military spouses. These autobiographies describe the domestic, practical, and emotional labour women perform, which includes managing military transfers, coping with military demands, maintaining the household, single parenting, providing familial and emotional support, and reproducing a sense of community belonging in new and unfamiliar locations. These accounts also shed light on the distinct form of emotional labour military wives perform — the labour of "worrying" and "simultaneously controlling" their worrying and emotions, ensuring they are not "revealed" to military spouses and families.

Similarly, Harrison and Laliberté (1993) highlight how Canadian military wives are expected to carry out most of the work during military transfers and postings, including packing, arranging relocations, and parenting alone, while simultaneously "foregoing" meaningful paid employment, adapting to foreign cultures, and coping with isolation (p. 62, Harrison and Laliberte 1993):

> *"All the chores related to packing, moving, settling in, making arrangements, choosing new schools, changing schools, dealing with children's grief at leaving friends, dealing with their own grief are typically performed by military wives themselves, most feeling like single parents." (p. 56, Harrison and Laliberte 1993)*

In addition, Harrison and Laliberté reinforce how the public and private lives of military personnel intersect. They detail another "expectation" placed on the (Canadian) military wife, that of participating in and facilitating "military socialising" and "entertaining". This includes organising social gatherings for other officers' wives, hosting members of their husbands' regiments, and "indoctrinating" other military spouses into the "etiquette of base existence". Harrison and Laliberté underscore the critical role such gendered participation plays in "advancing" military husbands' upward career mobility (p. 60-62, Harrison and Laliberte 1993).

The "Ideal" or "Model" Military Wife

Scholars (Spanner 2022; Enloe 2000; Gray 2017; Ziff and Garland-Jackson 2020) have paid attention to the "ideal military wife" or the "model military wife" in the context of Anglophone militaries.

For instance, Enloe analyses the "model" military wife of the 20th century and has laid out specific features associated with the construct. The "ideal" military wife, according to Enloe's analysis, is expected to play a supportive, nurturing role — to quit her job and relocate every time her soldier-husband is transferred. She is also expected to respect military hierarchy and "provide unpaid labour to make the base a community" (p. 183, Enloe 2000). Enloe argues the ideal military wife:

> *"… comes to her own conclusion that the most important thing for her own and her family's well-being is that her husband performs his military job well. She feels she is an integral part of what she thinks of as 'the military family'. Being a supportive military wife gives her a genuine sense that she is doing her 'patriotic duty'. She enjoys unpaid volunteer work; it helps her husband's career, and it makes her feel like a useful member of the military community. She realises that she has to accept a number of restrictions based on rank, but she views those restrictions as logical and crucial. Instead, she gains a sense of expanded authority and responsibility by helping younger wives learn and accept the military tropes. She does not burden her husband unduly with these maternal worries. She has become a very competent occasional single parent and head of household when her soldier husband is away. Still, she does not take inordinate pride in her competence. She is pleased to relinquish the head-of-household mantel when her husband is home. She sees constant military transfers as chances to make new friends and explore new places. She is grateful to the military for providing a special opportunity for acquiring public respect." (p. 162-164, Enloe 2000)*

Elizabeth Ziff and Felicia Garland-Jackson explore the ideal military wife as a "paradoxical figure" and present a "continuum" to illustrate how military wives they interviewed made a distinction between a "good" or "ideal" military wife" and a "dependapotamus" wife (p. 377-78, Ziff and Garland-Jackson 2020):

> *"On one end of the wife 'continuum', there is the woman who is a 'good' wife, supportive, resilient, independent, perhaps working outside of the home in productive or volunteer labour, as she performs admirably as a complement to, and worthy extension of her service member husband. On the other end of the*

> *continuum is the wife, a 'Dependapotamus', overly rank-conscious and erroneously assuming their husband's rank… A good wife works toward the mission and appreciates the military and her family, whereas a bad wife, the dependapotamus trope, is lazy, opportunistic, and a drain on both her husband and the community as a whole." (p. 377-78, p. 382, Ziff and Garland-Jackson 2020)*

Ziff and Garland-Jackson underscore the paradoxical ways the figure of the "ideal" military wife is constructed, emphasising how this construction helps produce and reinforce the man's role as the "head of the household". They highlight that the "ideal" military wife is expected to be both "independent" and "self-sufficient" when her husband is away from home and yet be "completely dependent" on him when he is home", reaffirming his status as the head of the family (p. 391, Ziff and Garland-Jackson 2020).

Spanner has explored how the Canadian Armed Forces construct the "ideal" spouse as "self-reliant" and "resilient". The military wife in Canada is framed as someone who not only adjusts and adapts to military demands, obligations, and cultural shocks but also "constantly assesses" her ability and capacity to endure military pressures by "enhancing" personal entrepreneurial skills and "developing productive thought patterns". In doing so, the ideal spouse not only "withstands" and "endures" the challenges of military life but also "bounces back" and "thrives" by adopting the right mindset and outlook (p. 235-238, Spanner 2022). Spanner has further highlighted how the ideal wife:

> *"… undertakes the roles of both husband and wife during deployments, including traditionally masculine tasks of managing household finances, taking care of insurance, and being able to fix the plumbing and car issues. She prioritises her husband's military service, arranges her labour and practices accordingly, and views doing so as being in the best interest of herself and her family. She not only provides essential gendered labour but also actively dismantles the constraints that prevent her from doing so. She invests in her capacity to adhere to the gendered requirement of military life and sees this as a means to ensure her wellbeing. She is entrepreneurial in the face of employment challenges, reorients her professional skills and career aspirations according to the military, and, in order to be more available to the home front and to be better able to prioritise the military member's service, she develops an entrepreneurial spirit, takes up self-employment and runs her own businesses as solutions to frequent relocations." (p. 235-238, Spanner 2022)*

Gendered Agency

In making a gendered analysis of the practices and processes of militarisation, critical military and feminist scholars have examined how women experience, "make sense of", and respond to the "micro-politics" of military power — how they interpret and perceive military requirements and the demands of everyday military life, particularly the expectations associated with the military wife (Hyde 2015, 2017). In this context, existing theorisation has directed attention to gendered agency and examined military wives' and spouses' "power" and "positionality" vis-à-vis the military institution (Hyde 2015, 2017; Ziff and Garland-Jackson 2020; da Silva 2017). Building on this, theorists have offered a critical feminist insight: military power, institutional policies, and everyday practices of militarisation are "felt, imagined, and understood" in "profoundly different ways" by different women. Moreover, they emphasise the necessity to document the "differential experiences" and "multiple positionalities" of diverse women married to men serving in state militaries to comprehensively understand the operations of military power and the perpetuation of militarisation in private and public spaces (Duncanson and Woodward 2016; Enloe 1988, 2000; Hyde 2015).

For example, Ziff and Garland-Jackson (2020) have investigated how civilian wives of American service members "navigate" the roles, expectations, and stereotypes associated with being a military wife within the institution's community-oriented context (Ziff and Garland-Jackson 2020). They highlight how constructed military wife stereotypes are "pervasive" — shaping how women understand or perceive themselves, relate to "other" wives in the military social order and are drawn upon to "exercise agency" — to establish their own identity within military spaces and conditions (p. 378). Military wives Ziff and Garland-Jackson interviewed for their research both reproduced ("reified") gendered stereotypes and utilised various "mechanisms" or "devices of agency", including "symbolic boundary work, gender policing, stereotyping, self-identifications, to create and assert their own distinct identity. In doing so, Ziff and Garland-Jackson highlight how military wives' "exerted agency" to "self-identify", "define" their "social positioning" within military social circles, and "distance themselves from less desirable wife imagery" (p. 382-392).

Ziff and Garland-Jackson (2020) observe that "almost all" of the military wives they interviewed perceived themselves as "subordinate" to their husbands within the military community (p. 378). In response, many invoked a sense of "independence" as a strategy to "navigate" or "overcome" this subordinate positioning and status (p. 392). In exploring the agency of military wives, the authors highlight that an officer's wife's identity, roles, and obligations are "determined" by the "needs and priorities" of both the military institution and the service member husband. This subordinate role,

they argue, impacts not only the wives' relationships with their husbands but also has "tangible consequences" for their agency and employment:

> *"Wives' loss of agency commences with the tying of their lives and identities to their husbands' status as a service member. The demands of two competing institutions: the military organisation and the military family, and constraints inherent to the military lifestyle, including frequent moves, long periods of solo parenting, and intense bouts of spouse unemployment, often negatively affect the wives' employment trajectories, resulting in wives' limited career mobility, lower wages, and dampened aspirations. While we would like to present wives as autonomous entities… From our perspective, we would suggest that military wives are perhaps only semi-autonomous because, within the military community, they are viewed one-dimensionally as extensions of their husbands and thusly labelled with his classification, officer or enlisted, and his current rank and years of service. The military is a highly gendered institution that thrives on traditional patriarchal structures, where the conforming wife is tasked with holding the family together thus enabling the husband to be free to pursue his career. By strictly following this traditional gender model, military wives may not only become dependent on their husbands but also feel repressed and constrained by their limited agency." (p. 378-379, Ziff and Garland-Jackson 2020)*

Rodrigues da Silva focuses on the experiences of Brazilian officers' and sergeants' wives, exploring how they cope with the stresses and difficulties of military life — including isolation, frequent displacements, husbands' absences, and disruptions to their careers. She also examines how these women understand the idea of the "military as a family" or the concept of the "Brazilian military family". Da Silva highlights the "resilience" of these women in dealing with the military requirements and obligations (p. 223-224, Silva 2017). According to Da Silva, military wives are "endowed" with a very particular form of female agency:

> *"…life in constant transit and the absence of a military husband allows the women to be active in the military community. They participate in philanthropic activities and establish alliances and convivial relationships with other military wives that superimpose the hierarchical relationships of the barracks. This happens, for example, when there are bonds of friendship between a captain's family and a commander's family." (p. 223-24, Da Silva 2017)*

Enloe has documented the multiple positionalities of American military wives in relation to militarisation. She has highlighted how some women found a sense of purpose, security, and comfort in being military wives and living on military bases, even as they endured the challenges of military life — including strict hierarchy, constant relocations, single parenting, and long periods of spousal separation. In contrast, other military wives experienced depression, dislocation and social isolation as they dealt with military life and its requirements (p. 161, Enloe 2000; p.99, Enloe 2017). Of particular significance is Enloe's attention to "militant" military wives. She highlights how some women refused to accept or succumb to institutional pressures and expectations, and in doing so, they "demilitarised" their marriages. According to Enloe, these women rejected their military husbands' career aspirations and challenged the gendered expectation of being supportive and loyal to military demands (p. 291, Enloe 2000). The "militant" military wife is a woman who sees herself as having her own rights, is not dependent on her soldier-husband for safety, housing, or healthcare, and holds a paid job of her own without regard for military expectations (ibid.).

Enloe contends that militant military wives are, perhaps unsurprisingly, those who maintain cultural and bureaucratic distance from the military, such as military widows and divorced military wives. She positions these women as "activists" and argues how these women have made "antimilitarism" an "integral part of their feminist politics" while making an important and critical observation: militant women often find it challenging to build or maintain alliances with military wives situated within institutional spaces (p. 192, p. 196, Enloe 2000). In making a gendered assessment of military power, Enloe establishes how women's diverse experiences of and responses to strategies of militarisation sustain the operations of military power and highlights the "political" significance of "gendered power" in shaping the workings of international relationships and global politics (p. 90, Enloe 2017):

> *"Every military base depends for its operation on women occupying a range of social locations, performing quite different roles... They are not natural allies. Many of these women may disagree with the others' assessments; they may not trust each other. But they all have interesting base stories to tell. Moreover, the separations between them are among the things that sustains that base."*

Alexandra Hyde (2015, 2017) has explored how civilian women married to British servicemen understand and "make sense" of their lives as military wives. Hyde has documented the everyday narratives, emotions, and "heuristic practices" through which military wives perceive, interpret and identify with military life, including how they respond to the armed forces' demands on their time, the conventions they are expected to perform, and the locations they are required to live (p. 67, Hyde 2015).

Hyde explores women's lived experiences and agency of civilian women married to soldiers in the British army to "trouble" the assumption that military wives are "default militarised subjects" whose "choices and opportunities for self-determination" are restricted or who "unquestioningly" follow, support, or invest in the military institution through a kind of "false consciousness" (p. 12, p. 52, p. 138, p. 152, Hyde 2015). Hyde notes how military wives she interviewed were "acutely" aware of the military's rank structure and how rank shaped their everyday lives (p. 107, Hyde 2015; p. 100, Enloe 2017). They considered their roles as military wives and assessed the potential losses and gains they experienced as they engaged with the military social order and associated requirements. Hyde highlights how military wives "emphasised their choices" while simultaneously acknowledging military conditions and limitations within which those choices were made (p. 151, Hyde 2015; p. 100, Enloe 2017).

On the one hand, Hyde paid attention to the lived experiences of military wives who supported militarised hierarchies and imposed military expectations on other wives. These women not only played their supportive roles but also believed that "fulfilling wifely expectations" and upholding gendered divisions kept the Army's base "running smoothly" and ensured military effectiveness, which was deemed to contribute to national security (p. 101, Enloe 2017, citing Hyde 2015). In observing these gendered dynamics, Hyde highlights how military wives "co-opt" and reproduce military power (p. 13, Hyde 2015; p. 101, Enloe 2017). On the other hand, Hyde also highlights how some military wives felt "constrained" by military expectations — those imposed by official policy and by other wives on the base. Hyde illustrates how these women's everyday experiences were shaped by a mixture of "escapism", "frustration", and "ambivalence". Women interviewed "acknowledged" the failures, confusion, and compromises they faced in coping with military demands and "described the active process of making and remaking something workable of their labour in circumstances they often found less than ideal" (p. 56, p. 73, Hyde 2015; p. 57, p. 67, Hyde 2017).

In this context, Hyde makes a critical observation: despite feeling restricted (constrained), most of these military wives believed they had "enough autonomy" to make "meaningful choices". Moreover, these women derived "emotional satisfaction and a sense of pride and belonging from being part of the regimental family" and investing their labour into the military apparatus (p. 73, Hyde 2015; p. 100, p. 102, Enloe 2017 citing Hyde 2015).

Through a gendered analysis of the micro-politics of military power, Hyde underscores how everyday practices of militarisation are sensed, understood, and rationalised differently by women. She illustrates how the gendered relationship to military power, presence, and conditions is neither "uniform" nor "fixed" as military wives "negotiate", "co-opt", or "resist" military power, practices and

conditions in their everyday lives (p. 26, p. 51, p. 141, p. 151, Hyde 2015; 2017). Hyde illustrates how military wives occupy an "ambiguous position" "as both the victims and the agents of military power (and militarisation), sometimes complicit in its circulation, sometimes active in renegotiating or defusing its effects" (p. 139-145, Hyde 2015; p. 195, Hyde 2017).

Moreover, Hyde has documented the various means through which women married to soldiers in the British army "asserted agency, choice and discursive control over their mobility" (p. 71, Hyde 2015). Military wives she interviewed positioned themselves "outside" the institution and provided "alternative interpretations of the meaning and purpose of their labour, identities, and feelings". They employed "micro-practices", "sense-making narratives", and "cosmopolitan imaginaries" to negotiate, appropriate, and translate the effects of military power in their everyday lives (p. 69, p. 71, p. 140, p. 151-156, Hyde 2015). Drawing on these empirical insights, Hyde highlights how military wives exercised agency as they "negotiated and bargained" with military conditions, hierarchies and social expectations in the everyday (ibid.; p. 205, Hyde 2017).

Furthermore, Hyde draws on gendered agency to problematise the "nature" of military power and to contest processes of militarisation as "totalising form(s) of domination" (p. 10, p. 13, Hyde 2015; p. 195-196, Hyde 2017). She draws on diverse gendered experiences of everyday militarisation to argue that military power and its effects are "emergent", "contingent", and "fluid" — shaped by and shaping "different women in different ways". In doing so, Hyde highlights the political significance of gendered labour in sustaining and reproducing broader structures of military and geopolitical power (p. 42, p. 127, p.140, Hyde 2015).

Gray has not explicitly explored gendered agency but has paid attention to British military wives as "vectors of power". Gray (2017) has explored how women "make sense" of their lives and the labour they perform in their memoirs (p. 351). Women, in their writings, acknowledge the "hardships" associated with military life and the "sacrifices" they had to make. They described their experience of acting as single parents and taking on additional domestic and familial roles as "hellish" (p. 353). At the same time, women "unconditionally" accept military challenges, support their husbands in their military careers, and frame the sacrifices they made as "freely chosen choices" they "knowingly" and "willingly" made because of love (p. 356-7). Moreover, Gray has highlighted how these "conscious choices" of investing their unpaid, voluntary, domestic, and emotional labour in the apparatus and remaining committed to their husbands no matter the hardships were sources of pride for British military spouses. They not only contested the "'poor, sad" framing associated with the military wife figure and their identifications as "objects of pity" but also made strong and overt claims about the

importance of their labour to the institution and to military missions in their memoirs (p. 347, p. 357, p. 359).

In making a gendered analysis of military power, Gray (2017) has highlighted the critical role the military wife plays in "obscuring" domestic labour and "shutting down" space for critique of the military. Gray notes that, in their autobiographical accounts, military spouses describe and frame domestic responsibilities and emotional support as "non-work" — as something women "naturally" do as wives and mothers (p. 350, p. 357). Gendered investment is framed by women "under the code of love", positioned as expressions of love "freely and happily" undertaken rather than forms of labour that require recognition, remuneration, or respect (p. 356-7).

Lastly, Gray (2017) illustrates how British military wives construct their acts of love and sacrifice, the domestic and emotional labour they perform and invest in private and military spaces, as contributions "no civilian could ever truly understand". They then utilise these framings of love, labour, and sacrifice to "prohibit" "outside" ("civilian") critique of the military institution and its practices while simultaneously framing such critique as "something that inappropriately belittles the hardships" experienced by military personnel (p. 358).

By highlighting the critical of gendered labour in rendering the military as an institution beyond critique and in "depoliticising" women's contributions within the home and private military spaces, Gray positions military wives as "vectors of militarisation" and underscores the political significance of gendered labour to the "functioning of militaries, and the exercise of military power on the global stage" (p. 351, p. 360, Gray 2017).

Critical Military Studies

Feminist theorisation has brought the concrete, everyday experiences of military wives into critical discussions about militarisation and military power. In line with the above feminist insights, critical military studies (CMS), as a subfield of enquiry, has highlighted the political significance of the "domestic" arena and gendered labour to the "geopolitical" (Basham and Catignani 2018; Basham 2022; Basham et al. 2015; Basham and Bulmer 2017).

CMS approaches critique the limited and narrow "unidirectional" ways in which practices and processes of militarisation have been analysed and understood. CMS scholars move beyond identifying the military institution as the primary "source" of militarisation and resist the presumption that the military is doing the "-ising". Theorists conceptualise militarisation as a process that "simultaneously" produces and is produced by society in multiple ways. In this context, CMS approaches examine the "extent" and "character" of "social" and "daily" labour in "normalising", "contesting", or "reconfiguring" practices of militarisation and the "legitimacy" of militarised violence (p. 2-4, Basham 2022; p. 154, Basham and Catignani 2018).

CMS theorists such as Sergio Catignani and Basham (2018, 2021) establish an intimate link between geopolitics, domestic spaces, and gendered power and illustrate how military power, presence, and practices are "influenced by and emerge" from the private sphere of the home and women's labour. These scholars have highlighted the critical role women partners and spouses of British Army reservists play in facilitating, enabling, and challenging the nation-state's capacity to wage war and inflict militarised violence.

Basham and Catignani (2018) contend that reservists' women partners, despite identifying as civilians, are still expected to perform the military spouse role, "pick up the slack", and invest voluntary labour in the military (p. 160, p. 166). At the same time, the scholars note how these spouses are "less beholden" to and positioned outside of the military's formal structures compared to the spouses of regular (full-time) service members. In this context, Basham and Catignani argue reservists' partners hold "considerable agency" (control) over their labour and arguably have "more scope" (choice) to decide if, when, and how to invest their unpaid labour in the military apparatus (p. 165-166). By focusing on the lived experiences of these reservist partners, Basham and Catignani expose the "precarious" nature of military power and its reliance on the "everyday", "emotional", and "domestic" labour carried out in the private space of the home by women (p. 167). They argue that military wives have the "capacity" through their everyday practices to either "facilitate" or "destabilise" military readiness and the state's ability to wage war. In doing so, their analysis reveals that war is not only

shaped by states and statespersons but is also enabled, normalised, and contested in the everyday through "invisible" and "unacknowledged" gendered power and labour (p. 153-156).

On similar lines, Jenny Hedstrom (2022) has "developed a typology"[5] to capture the different ways in which everyday, seemingly mundane gendered activities within domestic familial and private military spaces "underpin" the processes and practices of militarisation and help sustain armed conflict (Hedstrom 2022).

Hedstrom (2022) has illustrated the different ways women support militarisation. Women contribute to reproducing the "body politic" and the military workforce by carrying out feminised "reproductive" and "productive duties" such as caregiving and providing support (p. 65). Women participate in "emotional" and "symbolic" activities like praying, singing, and participating in public protests that support acts of violence (p.65-67). According to Hedström, women "maintain" the private-public dichotomy and support the rigid sexual division of labour by "primarily" taking on domestic-familial roles associated with private "apolitical" arenas. Women frame "female" bodies as vulnerable to myriad forms of structural, physical, societal, and sexual violence. They then wield this gendered protectionist logic, the idea that women must be protected, to justify and "legitimise" armed conflict (p. 68).

Finally, Hedström draws attention to how women "oppose" war-making practices by drawing on "traditional feminine roles and maternal identities", such as motherhood, as "collective action frames" to challenge and question actions of the state and militarist policies tools for protest and calls for justice under military rule. Through their gendered analysis, Hedström positions the "household" and "everyday" gendered labour as key actors holding "potential" to legitimise, enable, or reject military power (p. 59, p. 65-68, p. 70, Hedstrom 2022).

Enloe has consistently demonstrated how the personal and private realms are deeply political and connected to international relations (Enloe 2000). In doing so, Enloe challenges the portrayal of women as passive "victims" and instead highlights how gendered labour influences the functioning of global politics (p. 34, Enloe 2014; p. 90, Enloe 2017). Enloe further argues that to understand how gendered power structures are built and maintained, feminist scholars must examine how women

[5] Hedstrom "presents the typology as a heuristic device envisioned to facilitate analysis and thinking about women's gendered labour" (p. 59, Hedstrom 2022) and how "women inform, underwrite and shape armed conflict-insurgencies in multiple, sometimes conflicting, ways" (p. 71, Hedstrom 2022). Hedstrom notes, "these categories are neither stable nor fixed, but rather fluid and temporally specific: a woman may engage in different types of militarised social reproductive work at different times in her life. Some types of militarised social reproductive work overlap; others do not" (p. 60, Hedstrom 2022).

married to men serving in state-national militaries perceive and interpret feminist movements in their societies (p. 4, Enloe 2000; p. 106, Enloe 2017).

Military Wives and Feminism

Lynne R. Dobrofsky and Constance T. Batterson (1977) have explored the relationship between feminism and American military wives. They investigated how American military wives understood and engaged with the feminist movement and assessed the degree to which it had influenced their thinking, involvement, and overall perceptions. Based on their quantitative survey findings, they make the following observations.

Most American military spouses showed little interest or involvement in the feminist movement. They criticised and were uncomfortable with the idea of feminism, especially if it was linked to "political activism", "radical ideas", and "objectionable" actions such as bra-burning. They rejected the "putative tendencies" of the ideology and framed feminists as "selfish" women who were overtly focused on altering societal perceptions of women and adopted "hate and blame men" attitudes. Lastly, military spouses critiqued the "rush to do too much too fast" and preferred a more "calm and less threatening" version of feminism (p. 676-79, p. 683, Dobrofsky and Batterson 1977).

Dobrofsky and Batterson identify the "insulated" and "isolated" nature of military life as a significant reason for the limited impact and penetration of feminist ideas within the American armed forces. The scholars note how the military provides military wives with "occupational, social, recreational, and residential activities" and accommodates most of their material needs. As a result, women "enjoy" and experience a "special" form of security" rooted in material comfort and familial stability, which makes them "relatively unavailable for recruitment" into the feminist movement (ibid.)

…

This study engages with the above literature in various ways, which are detailed below.

First, this study makes an original contribution as it is the first systematic study of women married to officers of the Indian Army and sheds light on previously unexplored gendered Global South perspectives[6]. While numerous blogs written by Indian Army officers' wives (Mamgain 2025; Randhawa 2010; Nandedkar 2019; Randhawa 2010) offer insights into the lived experiences of women within military institutions, highlighting normative aspects such as military postings and deployments, the enforcement of rank hierarchies, voluntary participation in welfare organisations, and the perceived stability of family life and career continuity, there remains a notable gap in academic research. To date, no scholarly study has systematically examined the lives of Indian Army officers' wives, nor has any work analysed how their everyday experiences intersect with broader structures of power within India's socio-political landscape.

Second, this work engages with the above body of feminist literature and CMS approaches by adopting a similar ontological shift from macro-level institutional analysis to the micro-level lived realities of women within military structures. The study explores how officers' wives of the Indian Army perceive, interpret, and engage with the Indian military apparatus, the "micro-politics of military power", the constructed figure of the ideal or model military wife, military expectations, and military practices.

In doing this, however, this study adopts a methodological approach that diverges from existing scholarship in its engagement with the military apparatus. Notably, while this research acknowledges the patriarchal nature of the military as a given, it avoids introducing the researcher's perspective of the military as a patriarchal institution during interviews. For instance, Hyde (2015) emphasises the gendered nature of military structures in her interviews, posing questions such as, "Do you think some people have an unfair perception of stereotypes like military wives? Have you avoided becoming a stereotypical [senior soldier's] wife? How do people avoid becoming those?" (p. 102, Hyde, 2015). Similarly, Ziff and Garland-Jackson (2020) asked, "Do negative stereotypes of enlisted wives negatively affect your perception of yourself? What obstacles do you think get in your way when trying to find a

[6] Gray (2017) has paid attention to the UK military and the autobiographies of civilian women married to its servicemen. Catignani and Basham (2018) examined the British Army and explored the experiences of reservists' spouses and partners. Hyde (2015) has paid attention to women married to British servicemen and soldiers living on a military base in Germany. Ziff and Garland-Jackson (2020) have paid attention to civilian wives of service members serving in different branches of the United States of Army, Navy, Air Force (AF), and Marine Corps (USMC). Dobrofsky and Batterson (1977) have also paid attention to wives of officers and enlisted soldiers serving in the American army. Segal (1986) has explored the experiences of American officers' wives. Spanner (2022) has paid attention to civilian women married to men serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. Harrison and Laliberte (1993) have paid attention specifically to officers' wives of the Canadian military. Cristina Rodrigues da Silva (2017) has paid attention to the lived experiences of Brazilian officers' and sergeants' wives.

job? Do you think the military cares about your education and employment satisfaction? Do you consider your family more traditional in that you are the primary parent who handles the majority of domestic and childcare duties? If you do work, are household duties split, or do you perform normative female gendered labour?" (p. 385, Ziff and Garland-Jackson 2020).

In contrast, this study employs open-ended interpretive questions, such as "What do you think is the role of an army officer's wife?" or "What is your take on the AWWA, Ladies' Meet, etc? What do you make of these events?" This approach allows participants to articulate their perceptions without being directed by pre-existing assumptions, including whether and how they perceive the Indian Army as patriarchal.

Moreover, this study goes beyond and adds to the existing literature by exploring the subjective interpretation of the micro-politics of military power in addition to exploring officers' wives' political labour (as noted in Chapter Two). The work also analyses how officers' wives of the Indian Army engage with and perceive the broader socio-cultural patriarchal milieu of Indian society that they are a part of, including their interpretations of feminism (Dobrofsky and Batterson 1977). It also acknowledges the deeply ingrained patriarchal nature of Indian society, encompassing social norms, cultural expectations, and family dynamics. However, rather than imposing this perspective during interviews, the study adopts an open-ended, exploratory approach (Jacoby 2006). For instance, open-ended questions, such as "Is there a division of domestic duties and household responsibilities in your home? Do you adhere to the notion of there being the man of the house?" were asked to explore how Army officers' wives interpret and engage with dominant societal norms and family dynamics characteristic of middle-class urban India including whether and how they perceive these as patriarchal. As another example, questions such as "Do you see yourself as liberated in comparison to women and friends your age?" were included to capture officers' wives' subjectivities—how they experienced, understood, and articulated their identities within broader social, cultural, and institutional frameworks.

Third, in line with existing feminist and CMS theorisation, this study underscores the feminist insight that military power, presence, and conditions are experienced, interpreted, and understood in different ways and inform different behaviours ranging from resistance to reinforcement and everything in between (p. 2, Duncanson and Woodward 2016). This study conceptualises a gendered spectrum as an analytical tool to capture and map the complexity of gendered labour and illustrates the multiple standpoints occupied by officers' wives of the Indian Arm concerning the micro-politics of military power, specific military legislations, and the socio-cultural milieu they are a part of (ibid.). The study uses the spectrum to underscore the political significance of gendered labour and power to

the geo-political. It helps understand the "capacity" and potential of officers' wives of the Indian Army in upholding or critiquing the processes of militarisation, securitisation, and patriarchy, including gendered relations, divisions, and hierarchies, and militarised violence.

In other words, the proposed gendered spectrum helps analyse and identify how officers' wives of the Indian Army engage with the micro-politics of military power through support, liminality, or critique. Within this framework, the study introduces[7] a set of broad analytical and conceptual frameworks, the loyalist, liminal, and militant 'military wife' archetypes, which together constitute the gendered spectrum.

[7] These archetypes have been conceptualised based on officers' wives' self-identifications concerning military power, in addition to secondary literature.

Archetypes in Relation to Military Power

The 'military wife' archetypes of loyalist, liminal, and militant serve as a useful framework for understanding broad patterns of gendered engagement. They help identify broadly how different officers' wives adopt different facets of these archetypes as they engage with the micro-politics of military power.

These archetypes are grounded in empirical evidence and have been theoretically validated through the aforementioned scholarship on military spouses and their relationship to the micro-politics of military power. They enable a comparative understanding of the similarities between the lived experiences of officers' wives in the Indian Army and those of military wives, both soldiers' and officers' spouses, in other geographical settings.

The 'Loyalist' Military Wife

Some officers' wives interviewed self-identified as loyalists of the Indian Army, as "loyal" or "vocal" "supporters" of the military. These women "chose" to "merge" their identity with the military and their military husbands, play the supportive role, and prioritise military and familial domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations. They did not perceive the military apparatus as a patriarchal structure even though, amongst them, some conceded to its masculine character. These officers' wives not only negated military expectations as constraints but derived genuine satisfaction from investing their voluntary and unpaid labour in the apparatus. Moreover, they made explicit and overt claims about the significance of their gendered labour and supportive roles to military effectiveness, officers' upward career mobility, and familial stability. They took pride in "handling everything" at home independently, including children, relocations, and deployments, without burdening their husbands, and were critical of wives who "worried their husbands" with domestic concerns. Loyalist officers' wives acknowledged the role of military husbands in socialising women into the military wife role, often assuming a wife's behaviour reflected on her husband. At the same time, they saw themselves as mentors, taking pride in teaching new entrants the etiquette of army life. These officers' wives' distinct empirical narratives helped conceptualise and ground the loyalist archetype proposed in the study.

The lived experiences of officers' wives of the Indian Army provide empirical evidence that women not only reproduce but also actively attempt to embody the features of the "ideal" or "model" military wife construct described in existing scholarship (Enloe 2000; Spanner 2022). While grounded in the Indian context, the loyalist archetype also resonates with the "ideal Canadian spouse" and the "model

military wife" theorised in existing literature. Like their counterparts in other national contexts, Indian officers' wives took pride in supporting their military husbands. They derived a sense of "political purpose", "security", and "comfort" from their association with and participation in the military institution.

The 'Liminal' Military Wife

Some officers' wives interviewed simultaneously supported and challenged the micro-politics of military power. Unlike the loyalist women, women did not "merge" their identities with the military or their military husbands. They were critical of the supportive role they were expected to play and often described themselves as "adjuncts" to their spouses. Similar to the civilian wives of American service members interviewed by Ziff and Garland-Jackson (2020), these officers' wives "expressed frustration and identified problems with their roles and the military community, but also talked about things they liked in this lifestyle and found great satisfaction in being part of a military spouse community". Echoing the experiences of "civilian women married to British servicemen and soldiers" Hyde (2015) has directed attention to, Indian Army officers' wives felt "constrained by expectations of the military and other wives" and described the "active process of making and remaking something workable within circumstances that were often less than ideal" by "balancing" their professional aspirations with military responsibilities.

These officers' wives' distinct empirical narratives helped conceptualise and ground the liminal 'military wife' archetype.

The 'Militant' Military Wife

Finally, some officers' wives actively chose to critique the military apparatus and its associated gendered practices. Women challenged the expectation of obligatory voluntary labour, questioned its influence on officers' career advancement, and demanded remuneration for their contributions. Identifying as "working women" who had deliberately distanced themselves from the army, these officers' wives prioritised their professional aspirations over military expectations. They viewed military expectations as constraints, highlighting the limited mobility and autonomy imposed on military wives and critiquing the "dependent and subordinate role and status" assigned to them within the broader military apparatus. These women explicitly described the military as a misogynistic and patriarchal institution, drew attention to how gendered behaviours and labour are regulated, and

underscored the crucial role officers' wives play in reproducing the institution's masculinist and patriarchal foundations. These officers' wives' distinct empirical narratives helped conceptualise and ground the militant archetype.

Once again, similarities can be drawn between the "militant" (divorced or widowed) military wives who "demilitarised their marriage", as theorised by Enloe (1988; 2000), and the officers' wives of the Indian Army. These women actively distanced themselves from the military apparatus. They pursued paid labour independently, showing little regard for military obligations or hierarchical expectations, echoing the experiences of "women married to British servicemen and soldiers" (Hyde 2015).

This chapter now turns to other analytical and conceptual frameworks proposed in the study to understand complex gendered sociopolitical labour.

The Military-Patriarchal Power (MPP) Model

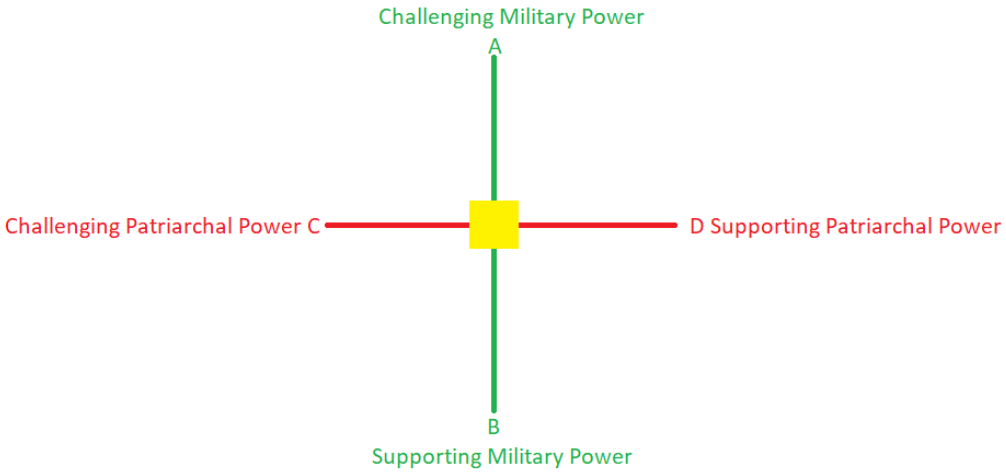
This study proposes and develops the Military-Patriarchal Power (MPP) model to answer the research question — how do women engage with and perceive the military apparatus and the broader socio-cultural milieu they are a part of?

The MPP model is structured along two analytical axes, the Military-Patriarchal (MP) axis and the Patriarchal-Power (PP) axis, and has been conceptualised in a broad sense. This framework helps the reader understand which specific military and socio-cultural practices have been identified and analysed in this research and how military and patriarchal power have been conceptualised and explored.

Additionally, the model serves as a guide to recognise and map the diversity of gendered labour, illustrating the complex ways in which officers' wives of the Indian Army interpret and perceive different military and socio-cultural practices.

The model also offers insight into and reflects the broader social context (patterns of socialisation and institutionalisation) and everyday milieu in which officers' wives of the Indian Army are situated in, engage with and describe.

Figure 1. The Military-Patriarchal Power Model



Military practices, specific military provisions and socio-cultural-familial norms identified and addressed in the research through interviews were grounded in ethnographic insights and existing literature. This includes scholarship that has documented the patriarchal nature of the social and

cultural order in India, as well as literature that explores the gender-military nexus and the lived experiences of military spouses across diverse geographical contexts.

Military Power on the AB Axis

In this study, militarisation is conceptualised at both the micro and macro levels—operating simultaneously within the private sphere of the home and military environments, as well as in broader civil society and civilian public spaces.

At the micro level, the gender–military nexus reveals how military power operates through everyday practices, expectations, and behaviours associated with military spouses across diverse geographical and institutional contexts (Enloe 2000; da Silva 2017; Segal 1986; Harrison and Laliberte 1993; Hyde 2015). The "micro-politics of military power" include managing the household and family relationships, participating in social and ceremonial activities within the military community, engaging in volunteer work, helping new members adjust to military life, monitoring gendering behaviour, adhering to military customs and etiquette, building relationships with other military spouses, and producing a sense of collective belonging within military spaces. The personal and professional lives of military personnel coexist as the actions, behaviour, and participation of military spouses influence the career advancement of their service members (ibid.).

Parallels can be drawn between the practices and norms of the Indian Army and those observed in other military contexts globally. Moreover, various personal narratives and blogs by Indian military wives provide firsthand accounts of their experiences. While not academic in nature, these sources offer valuable insights into the lived realities of these women and help identify the micro-practices of military power specific to the Indian Army.

The Military Power (MP) axis thus represents the "micro-politics of military power" as they operate within the institutional structures, social spaces, and cultural settings of the Indian Army. It encapsulates constructed military expectations, such as playing gendered roles, supporting husbands in their roles as military men, and managing the home, family, and children. Other expectations include acting 'appropriately', volunteering, socialising, organising various social functions, and performing an informal disciplinary role among the wives, including encouraging appropriate behaviour. The blurring of the public and private lives of military wives, particularly the role of women's voluntary and unpaid contributions in shaping officers' career trajectories, also defines the MP axis.

The practice of volunteering or investing unpaid labour in the apparatus can be understood specifically in the context of the Indian Army through the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA), an initiative aimed at improving the wellbeing of soldiers and their families. Officers' wives are expected to participate in and contribute to welfare initiatives through AWWA, including organising cultural events, running vocational training programmes or awareness sessions for soldiers' wives, distributing gifts (especially during festivals), holding medical or educational camps, and supporting widows or families of deceased soldiers.

Another military practice through which officers' wives are expected to invest unpaid labour into the institution is grooming — "indoctrinating women into the etiquette of base existence" (p. 60, Harrison and Laliberte 1993). My fieldwork revealed that grooming in the Indian Army involves "teaching" or "guiding" officers' and soldiers' wives on how to behave, conduct, and carry themselves in military spaces and settings, and takes two distinct forms. First, grooming refers to the informal yet strongly expected socialisation process through which senior officers' wives' mentor or guide junior officers' wives on appropriate dress, speech, conduct, and demeanour. This includes advising them on attire for official events, discouraging styles considered "loud" or improper, cultivating a polite, measured manner of speech, and instructing them in spatial and social hierarchies, such as seating arrangements, the order of service, and proper engagement with seniors and peers. Second, soldiers' wives are groomed by officers' wives across ranks on how to behave, dress, speak, and conduct themselves within the military environment.

Conversely, at the macro level, militarisation in India has has been theorised through a state-centric lens, characterised by military presence and implementation of militarist policies in civilian spaces— particularly in regions affected by armed conflict and secessionist movements, and officially designated as "disturbed" areas or placed under a "state of emergency" (Batool et al. 2016; Qutab 2012; Butalia 2002; Kazi 2007; Duschinski 2009). Building on this scholarship, the study incorporates militarist policies and practices in areas such as Kashmir, understood through specific provisions, such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA, as part of the broader analysis of militarisation along the military-patriarchal (MP) axis.

In other words, the MP axis encapsulates the practices, processes, and ideologies of militarisation that dominate and operate across both the public and private spheres of the military institution.

Patriarchal Power on the CD Axis

The cultural norms, societal expectations, and family dynamics analysed in this study are grounded in ethnographic insights and the aforementioned literature, which has elucidated the operation of patriarchy across both the private and public spheres of Indian society (Uberoi 1995; Dube 1988; Karlekar 1998; Thapan 1995, 2001; Kakar 2006; Chowdhry 2015; Naidu 2011; Soman 2009). Scholars have mapped the rigid division of labour within families, hierarchical power dynamics, such as those between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and gender-differentiated authority structures where the father or eldest male is positioned as the "head" of the household or the family (ibid.). They have also explored the roles of marriage, marriage customs, and motherhood in structuring women's lives and highlighted how gendered behaviour, sexuality, reproductive capacities, and mobility are controlled and regulated in Indian society. Furthermore, scholars have shown how patriarchy manifests as systemic discrimination within public institutions, including government and the military, particularly through the exclusion of women from combat roles (Soman 2009).

This body of literature provides a crucial foundation for the study's conceptualisation of patriarchy. It serves to theoretically ground the conceptualisation of the Patriarchal Power (PP) axis within the Military-Patriarchal Power (MPP) model.

The PP axis encompasses the gendered division of labour in domestic spaces, familial dynamics and hierarchies (as understood through relationships with mothers-in-law), and dominant notions such as the "man of the house". Cultural practices related to women's sexuality and bodily autonomy, including attitudes toward live-in relationships, premarital sex, and abortion, also inform the PP axis. Lastly, this axis provides a framework for understanding how officers' wives perceive and engage with the institution of marriage, ideologies of motherhood and feminism, and structural discrimination, particularly concerning the exclusion of women from serving in combat roles in the Indian Army[8].

[8] For ease of reading, this thesis will hereafter use the abbreviations MP (Military Power) and PP (Patriarchal Power). These terms, when used, refer specifically to the practices and dynamics outlined above.

Archetypes in Relation to Patriarchal Power

The 'Loyalist', 'Liminal', and 'Militant' military wife archetypes have been conceptualised to examine the complexity of gendered labour as it relates to practices and processes of militarisation. In addition to offering a valuable analytical framework for understanding broad patterns of gendered engagement within the micro-politics of military power, the proposed archetypes of military wives—loyalist, liminal, and militant—also function as conceptual tools to understand and analyse the political labour of officers' wives, particularly their perceptions and interpretations of specific provisions such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the broader military presence in regions such as Kashmir.

Building on this framework, the present study proposes an alternative set of 'military wife' archetypes—namely, the conservative, liminal, and feminist military wife—to highlight and understand the complexity of gendered labour and its relationship to patriarchal power specifically[9].

The 'Conservative' Military Wife

Some officers' wives self-identified as belonging to the old school of thought. Women believed patriarchy served a purpose as it helped dictate an individual's 'place' in society. They took pride in upholding and reproducing gendered hierarchies within the home and the family and stressed, for example, the significance of the notion of the man of the house. Women imagined and reproduced the domestic arena as a feminine arena and believed mothering was a woman's natural role (Chowdhry 2014; Thapan 1995; Dube 1988). They treated domestic work, work they and other housewives perform within the marriage and in the household, as "natural" work a woman performs as a married woman, a wife, and a mother (p. 221, Walby 1989; Gray 2017; ibid.). These officers' wives not only negated gendered bodily autonomy and emphatically negated the relevance of practices such as abortions and live-in relationships. They also dismissed gendered control wielded through these restrictions as a form of patriarchal control. Most women took for granted girls to be physically weak, dependent, and vulnerable and legitimised gendered control on mobility and autonomy.

In line with Dobrofsky and Batterson's quantitative survey findings, conservative officers' wives of the Indian Army were critical of feminism.

[9] These archetypes have also been conceptualised based on officer's wives' self-identifications concerning patriarchal power, in addition to secondary literature.

The 'Liminal' Military Wife

Liminal officers' wives simultaneously supported and challenged different socio-cultural practices, relations and ideologies. For example, women challenged gendered hierarchies within their homes by negating the relevance of notions such as the man of the house. They supported controlled bodily autonomy as they contested practices such as abortions and live-in relationships. As another example, officers' wives negated the relevance of patriarchal thought in contemporary times, employed domestic help for household chores, and celebrated women's bodily autonomy. They simultaneously refrained from supporting feminist thought and cited radical tendencies as rationales for their apprehension.

The 'Feminist' Military Wife

Finally, feminist officers' wives believed they had challenged patriarchal power and associated gendered tropes. Women not only acknowledged the pervasive influence of patriarchy in India's larger social order but also dismantled gendered divisions and hierarchies within their homes, supported gendered bodily autonomy, and identified as feminists, citing many examples of how they believed they had challenged patriarchal practices in their homes and marriage.

….

The broad ‘military wife’ archetypes proposed here capture the notable complexity of gendered labour and power. This study also makes a necessary caution. Officer’s wives might choose to tie themselves firmly to a particular archetype and identify (almost) exclusively with the practices through support, liminality, or critique as an expression of their agency.

Officer’s wives also chose to adopt facets of loyalist, liminal, or militant ‘military wife’ archetypes. In other words, an officer’s wife who embodied the archetype of the militant officer’s wife might still express worldviews that aligned with those of loyalist and liminal officer’s wives and vehemently defend the Indian Army against allegations of power. Conversely, a liminal or loyalist officer’s wife might critique the micro-politics of military power in a manner that resonates with the arguments of militant officers’ wives, perceiving military expectations as constraints or challenges. Militant or loyalist women like liminal officers’ wives might also experience social isolation and depression and describe their sense of dislocation” concerning military practices.

This is not to suggest that liminal or feminist officer’s wives did not uphold gendered hierarchies or divisions within their homes and families. Alternatively, the conservative and liminal officer’s wives challenged gendered control associated with bodily autonomy or adopted facets of feminist thought.

On the Spectrum of Military-Patriarchal Power

Some officers' wives interviewed identified with the loyalist 'military wife' archetype in relation to military power and simultaneously occupied a liminal relationship with the socio-cultural practices and familial relations. For example, women supported military expectations such as gendered roles, the practice of grooming, investment of voluntary labour in the apparatus through AWWA, and defended the Indian Army's role in Kashmir, and emphasised the necessity of AFSPA. At the same time, officers' wives challenged gendered relations and hierarchies within their homes, negated the relevance of having a patriarchal head of the family, and simultaneously refrained from supporting practices such as live-in relations or abortion.

As another example, I met officers' wives who identified as feminists, supported women's bodily autonomy, employed household help for domestic work, and worked in paid labour, sharing a liminal relationship with military power. They challenged the micro-politics of military power, as they did not invest their unpaid labour in the apparatus and instead took part in paid labour, irrespective of military expectations. At the same time, they legitimised military presence in conflict zones and evoked the necessity for the armed forces to hold special powers to operate in disturbed regions.

To understand this complexity of gendered labour, power, and engagement, this study brings together the above-proposed archetypes as follows:

The Conservative-Loyalist Military Wife (DB Space)

Some officers' wives support and legitimise processes and practices of militarisation in domestic and public arenas, the same way they uphold and reproduce patriarchal ideologies, beliefs, and relations in the familial order and broader society. By embodying these characteristics, they come to represent the conservative-loyalist model of the officer's wife.

The Conservative-Liminal-Militant Military Wife (AD Space)

Some officers' wives support different patriarchal ideologies, beliefs, and relations in the familial order and broader society. Simultaneously, they critique and contest the micro-politics of military power but support military presence in conflict zones. These women embody characteristics of the liminal, militant, and conservative 'military wife' archetype and are thus identified accordingly.

The Feminist-Liminal-Loyalist Military Wife (BC Spaces)

These officers' wives' critique and challenge gendered relations and hierarchies in the domestic arena, support bodily autonomy, and participate in paid labour. Simultaneously, they critique some military practices, such as the assessment of gendered contribution, but support other micro-politics of military power, legitimise military presence in conflict zones, and negate allegations against the army for misuse. They embody characteristics of the liminal, feminist, archetype in relation to patriarchal power and the loyalist 'military wife' archetype in relation to military power. Together, these dynamics helped conceptualise the above archetype.

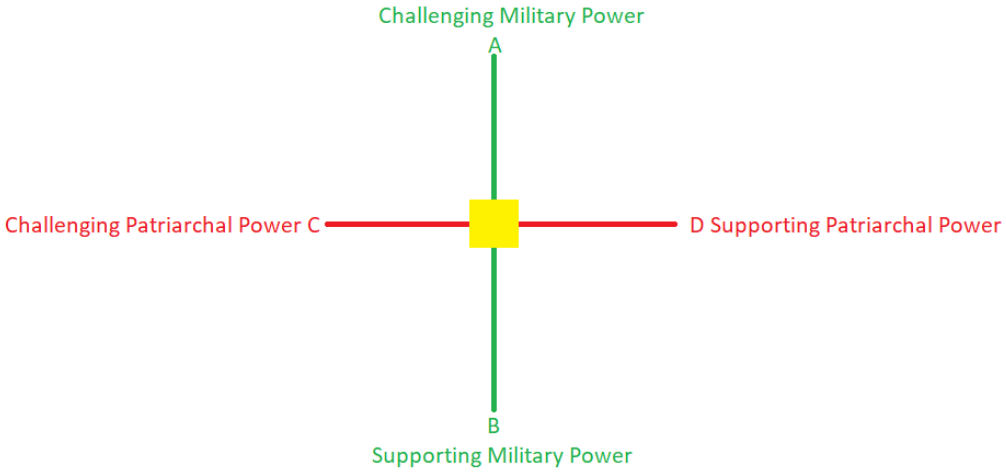
The Militant-Feminist Military Wife (AC Space)

Finally, some officers' wives were critical of and challenged military and patriarchal practices in both the public and private arenas. These women embody characteristics of the militant and feminist 'military wife' archetype and are thus identified as the militant-feminist officer's wife.

The Gendered Spectrum and the MPP Model

The conservative, liminal, and militant archetypes have been conceptualised to understand how officers' wives engage with PP, i.e. dominant patriarchal practices. Similarly, the loyalist, liminal, and feminist archetypes have been conceptualised to understand how officers' wives engage with MP, i.e. the military apparatus. The other archetypes help us understand how officers' wives engage with the MPP model, both the military and gender order. I highlight how the different proposed archetypes can be situated on the model and, in doing so, illustrate how officers' wives' complex socio-political labour and multiple standpoints concerning power can be mapped.

Figure 2. The Military-Patriarchal Power Model



For example, officers' wives whose empirical narratives fit the loyalist archetype occupy the extreme (B) space on the MP axis. Similarly, those whose narratives align with the conservative archetype occupy the extreme (D) space on the PP axis. The positionality of the feminist and militant archetypes on the PP and MP axes is intuitive, occupying the extreme (C) and (A) spaces, respectively. The liminal archetype moves along both axes, occupying multiple and shifting locations.

Once again, officers' wives who identify exclusively with the loyalist-conservative or militant-feminist archetypes occupy the extreme DB or AC spaces on the MPP model. Alternatively, some officers' wives embody features of different archetypes and, in doing so, move along the AB and DC axes of power, occupying shifting, contradictory, or overlapping DB, AD, AC, or BC spaces on the model. The model will help understand how officers' wives either occupy DB spaces on the model and vocally support the operations of military and patriarchal power in both private and public spaces. Alternatively, they

occupy moving and shifting spaces on the model and choose to support military or patriarchal power in either public or private arenas, or to an *extent*.

A crucial CMS insight the model helps underscore is that "militaries have the capacity for change and that they also comprise people who might have an interest in inducing institutional change" (p. 10, Duncanson and Woodward 2016). Both liminal and militant officers' wives of the Indian Army expressed a commitment to and vocally asserted the need for institutional reform. However, it is the gendered labour and power wielded by women within the organisation that often halts their feminist critique and efforts to transform the military.

Most significantly, the model elucidates how officers' wives who occupy the AC space exclusively—or those who move between the AC, AD, and BC spaces—face social resistance and isolation when attempting to escape (leave) the military-patriarchal axis. Their feminist critique is frequently halted or delegitimised by other officers' wives wielding power, those occupying DB, AD, or BC spaces on the Military-Patriarchal Power (MPP) model. In other words, Officers' wives who embody the militant-feminist archetype exclusively in relation to military and patriarchal power, as well as those who articulate militant, feminist and liminal positions, frequently described it as "difficult" and "impossible" to persuade other officers' wives—particularly those occupying the loyalist-conservative-liminal archetype—of the legitimacy of feminist critique.

Also significant is the way in which officers' wives often undermine feminist thought—whether articulated by others or developed through their own reflections. In several instances, women expressed perspectives that mirrored feminist or militant critiques of the military-patriarchal order, only to subsequently dismiss these critiques or rationalise them as necessary within the broader framework of military discipline, cohesion, or tradition. This simultaneous articulation and negation of feminist critique reveals the complexity of gendered subjectivity within military spaces. Similarly, women occupying feminist-militant or liminal positions do not necessarily or entirely reject conservative ideologies embedded within India's military and broader social order. Many officers' wives reflected critically on their shifting perspectives, describing how and why their views evolved in relation to military ideology and patriarchal structures. Yet, these reflections often coexisted with continued support for certain elements of military discourse and gendered expectations—illustrating the coexistence of critique and complicity within the lived realities of military wives.

Militant-feminist-liminal Officers wives of the Indian underscore a crucial feminist insight: military wives as “feminists who critique the operations of military power do not find alliances with military wives easy to create or sustain” (p. 196, Enloe 2000).

The model will also help understand how officers’ wives who occupy AC spaces — who choose to critique both the patriarchal social order and military norms and practices — face resistance and difficulty in escaping (leaving) the axis as their feminist critique is halted by other officers’ wives wielding power, those occupying DB, AD, or BC spaces on the model. Officers’ wives deemed it “difficult” or “impossible” to convince other officers’ wives of the legitimacy of feminist critique. These militant-feminist wives underscore a crucial feminist insight: “feminists who critique the operations of military power do not find alliances with military wives easy to create or sustain” (p. 196, Enloe 2000).

Another crucial CMS insight the model helps underscore is that “militaries have the capacity for change and that they also comprise people who might have an interest in inducing institutional change” (p. 10, Duncanson and Woodward 2016). Both liminal and militant officers’ wives of the Indian Army expressed a commitment to and vocally asserted the need for institutional reform. However, it is the gendered labour and power wielded by women within the organisation that often halts their feminist critique and efforts to transform the military.

The model helps illustrate how it is the complexity of gendered labour that plays a critical role in upholding and reproducing military and patriarchal power. In doing so, it uses the MPP model proposed in the study to expand upon existing critical military studies (CMS) and critical feminist insights. It underscores how “differential gendered experiences” of power sustain the workings of power, and gendered labour holds the potential to maintain and destabilise the “current gendered status quo” (Enloe 2000, 2014; Basham and Catignani 2018).

Rationales of Engagement

In addition to the MPP model and the proposed archetypes, this study introduces 'rationales' as conceptual tools to elucidate the complexity of gendered labour. The frameworks and underlying logics that Indian Army officers' wives employed—often in contradictory and overlapping ways—to engage with, perceive, and interpret military socio-cultural practices were central to conceptualising rationales. Women interviewed drew upon essentialist gendered assumptions, institutional rhetoric, aspects of realist thinking, and frameworks of pragmatism, security, and changing times to engage with military and patriarchal power. Moreover, officers' wives employed some of these framings and rationales to encourage women to invest their labour in and contribute to the military apparatus.

Gendered Assumptions, Hierarchies, and Gendering

Officers' wives are shaped by and employ essentialist gendered ideologies, constructed gendered hierarchies, and gendering as rationales to engage with power (Shepherd 2010; Peterson 2004, 2007).

Many women believed gender roles were "natural" and shaped by biological differences. For example, they believed that men are naturally more aggressive, while women are more peaceful, and that women naturally belong in the home, doing domestic work, with motherhood seen as an instinctive part of being a woman. They employed such essentialist gendered assumptions to engage with different practices such as gendered exclusions within military structures, gendered divisions within the home, and familial hierarchies.

Gendering also functioned as a tool through which officers' wives engaged with power (Peterson 2004, 2007). They ascribed masculine and feminine qualities not only to individuals but also to institutions, objects, and abstract concepts—constructing gendered imaginaries of the state, military, soldiers, territory, citizens, the 'home', the 'kitchen', autonomy, and violence. They then utilised these gendered framings to engage with power, for instance, with the Indian Army's presence in Kashmir, with gendered exclusions in combat, military expectations such as grooming, and restrictions of women's mobility in the private and public arena.

Political Realism and Pragmatic Engagement

Officers' wives, either explicitly or implicitly, employed and articulated realist thinking—particularly in relation to the processes and practices of state-centric militarisation, including military provisions such as AFSPA, and the Indian Army's presence in Kashmir. While some officers' wives self-identified as "realists", others echoed realist security perspectives, supporting (endorsing) aggressive military action, and legitimising military presence and control in the name of "national security", territorial integrity, and state sovereignty. Closely linked to realism was the rationale of *pragmatism*, where officers' wives employed "living in the real world" as logic to engage with women's sexuality, bodily autonomy, and gendered exclusions in combat.

The Logic of Protection

Women construct and invoke multiple notions of security to engage with power. These ranged from national security and soldier safety to women's safety and "domesticated" or social notions of security (tied up with ideas of familial stability and social security as experiencing collective or familial belonging) (p. 203, Hyde 2017).

Simultaneously, most officers' wives conceptualised security as a gendered (masculine) notion and arena, as something granted by the masculine. This gendered protectionist logic was used to engage with questions of state-led militarisation and the workings of patriarchal power in private and public spheres, more specifically.

The “Changing Times” Framework

Officers’ wives interviewed for this research were acutely aware of the pervasive nature of structural institutionalism and cultural socialisation in Indian society. Women reflected on shifts within military hierarchies and evolving social expectations, noting generational changes in institutional practices, family dynamics, and societal norms.

This is significant as many officers’ wives interpreted some of my questions and themes addressed and posed during the interviews, such as gendered division of labour between the couple, familial hierarchies upheld through the patriarchal head of the household, and practices associated with gendered bodily autonomy (abortion, premarital sex, and live-in relationships), as “new-generation” ideas, invoking a generational shift in thought processes. They then used this identification to justify their acceptance or rejection of such notions.

For example, some women firmly rejected these shifts, expressing scepticism towards live-in relationships and negating the necessity of altering gendered roles and divisions in the home. They asserted pride in their adherence to what they called traditional or “old school” values. Other officers’ wives used the opportunity to reflect on how and why their views had “shifted over time”, often citing factors such as greater social exposure, personal growth, or the persuasive influence of their children’s perspectives.

Similarly, officers’ wives reflected on changes in military hierarchy and expectations. Women described how the institution had become less rigid over time, spoke of evolving fashion trends, highlighted the increasing number of working officers’ wives, and noted the reduced pressure on women to participate in military activities and social functions. While some officers’ wives expressed concern over contemporary changes, fearing that increasing external exposure threatened the ethos of the Indian Army and emphasised the need for younger generations to uphold military decorum. Others supported the changes brought in and paradoxically employed the logic of the “military is changing/has changed” to rationalise their engagement with the micro-politics of military power and encourage women to participate in military social structures voluntarily. Officers’ wives also invoked the “changing times” framework to advocate for structural reforms within the military, highlighting the need for the Indian Army to adapt to evolving societal norms and changing worldviews.

The Institutional Rhetoric: The Military as Family, Benefactor, and Space of Opportunity

As outlined in Chapter Two, existing theorisation has highlighted the different strategies of militarisation and exposed how militaries frame themselves as *"*familial spaces*,* realms of adventure*, and* benevolent benefactors" to reinforce militarisation (Hyde 2015; Harrison and Laliberte 1993; Enloe 2000; Segal 1986). This study examines how officers' wives of the Indian Army wield institutional rhetoric on their own accord to engage with military and patriarchal power.

The study illustrates how officers' wives interviewed imagined the military as a family and used this familial framing to engage with the micro-politics of military power, including militarist policies and responses in states of emergency. They portrayed the army as a provider of material benefits, such as job security, medical care, economic subsidies, education, and recreational facilities, as well as social security in the form of collective identity, physical safety, symbolic reverence, and societal respect. Additionally, women viewed the military and its expectations as opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and women's empowerment. Officers' wives used these framings in different, contradictory or overlapping ways to engage with military power and practices in both private and public spaces.

It is important to highlight that, much like officers' wives who invoked the "changing times" framework to stress the need for the military to evolve in step with contemporary social shifts and shifting worldviews, women also critiqued institutional rhetoric. Some also voluntarily referenced the rhetoric of the military as a "family" but did so to challenge its legitimacy. Likewise, some officers' wives contested the military as a benevolent provider of material privileges, arguing that access to such benefits was determined not by need but by rigid hierarchies of rank and appointment.

While it may seem intuitive to assume that the loyalist military wife would conceptualise the military as a family, the conservative military wife would reinforce gendered divisions and hierarchies, and the militant military wife would employ the "changing times" framework to challenge the subordinate role of military wives, advocate for bodily autonomy, or contest hierarchical gender relations within the home, the relationship between these orientations and their perspectives is neither linear nor rigid. In practice, a loyalist or conservative officer's wife might also invoke the "changing times" framework to support practices related to bodily autonomy or to challenge gendered hierarchies within the household. Similarly, a feminist or militant officer's wife may, paradoxically, imagine the military as a family and use this rationale to justify support for militarist policies such as AFSPA.

As another example, an officer's wife may employ the "changing times" framework to reject welfare-related expectations but simultaneously reject the same framework concerning bodily autonomy or

feminist thought. Similarly, an officer's wife may negate the military as a family and use this as a rationale to critique welfare or grooming while simultaneously imagining the military as a benevolent benefactor that provided its personnel with material privileges.

In short, the broad military wife archetypes conceptualised in the research and rationales utilised by officers' wives do not serve a prescriptive but fluid purpose. This study does not suggest that officer's wives who challenged military power did not utilise the rationales of security, the military as a family, or a benevolent benefactor to engage with (or even support) military power. Likewise, the hypothesis does not suggest that officers' wives who upheld patriarchal power did not utilise the changing times framework or their proximity to paid labour and civil society to engage with (or even challenge) patriarchal power. The liminal militant officer's wife also imagined the military as a family or benevolent benefactor. Similarly, the anti-feminist officer's wife also advocated for women's rights and supported feminist thought to an extent. These archetypes and rationales serve as a guide to help the reader and the researcher recognise the complex, overlapping and contradictory ways in which officers' wives engaged with military-patriarchal power, the gendered order, and the gendered military apparatus.

Self-Identifications

In addition to the above rationales, officers' wives of the Indian Army utilised self-identifications, descriptions, and representations as a rationale to engage with power. For example, officers' wives leveraged their positive experiences in the military apparatus and mastery over expected military and domestic roles to describe themselves as loyal supporters of the army. They used this self-representation to assert their support for the Indian Army and associated militarist practices and policies. Similarly, other officers' wives described themselves as modern women, emphasising their participation in paid labour, exposure to civil society, and educational qualifications. They used these self-descriptions to critique and contest various military practices and expectations.

Officers' wives' self-identifications also functioned as rationales through which women engaged with patriarchal power, such as notions of gendered bodily autonomy. For example, officers' wives self-identified as modern women who had "chosen" to "change with time" or described how their children had influenced them to embrace change and used these self-identifications to support abortion, live-in relationships, or equitable division of labour in the homes. In contrast, other women identified as "belonging to the old school of thought" and used this identification to defend their apprehension and scepticism toward shifts in patriarchal and military practices.

To summarise, the empirical chapters will highlight how different officers' wives of the Indian army utilised the above rationales in myriad, complex, overlapping and contradictory ways to engage with military and patriarchal power. In doing so, they embody features of the different military wife archetypes proposed in the research. Consequently, they occupy specific, multiple, and shifting spaces on the Military-Patriarchal Axes.

Chapter Five will introduce officers' wives and demonstrate how they embody the 'loyalist', 'liminal', or 'militant' military wife archetype — or aspects of these archetypes — in complex ways as expressions of gendered agency. In doing so, the chapter will illustrate the specific, multiple, and shifting spaces they occupy on the MP axis.

Chapter Six will introduce more participants as officers' wives, illustrating and exploring how they embody the 'conservative', 'liminal', or 'feminist' military wife archetype — or facets of these archetypes — as expressions of gendered agency. Likewise, it will illustrate the specific, multiple, and shifting spaces they occupy on the PP axis.

Chapter Seven will illustrate how officers' wives embody the 'Militant-Feminist', 'Feminist-Liminal-Loyalist', 'Conservative-Liminal-Militant', or 'Conservative-Loyalist Military' archetype — or aspects or

facets of these archetypes — and illustrate the specific, multiple, and shifting spaces they occupy on the MPP model.

The next chapter outlines the research methods, methodology employed, and motivations for undertaking this research and situating it within CMS and FSS.

Chapter Four: Methodology

This chapter outlines and summarises the methodology of the research. The following pages outline the research plan, describe the research methods employed, detail the field sites, and present the research sample, including the identity markers of the participants. The chapter examines my insider/outsider positionality as a researcher in relation to the participants, field site, and research. It also elaborates how my identity markers interplay with the research process and shape power dynamics between myself and the research participants. The chapter also engages with the political and epistemological dimensions of representing officer's wives' socio-political labour. The chapter's concluding section highlights the motivations for undertaking this study and its limitations.

Fieldwork

The fieldwork for the research was completed between September 2019 and April 2020 in the army cantonments of Bangalore and Delhi. These field sites were chosen to take advantage of pre-existing, informal networks and personal contacts that made it possible to engage and meet research participants from different military, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds. Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone (due to the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent travel restrictions imposed). All interviews were conducted in English and Hindi for ease of communication and to build rapport.

Field Site Location

Site	**Interviews conducted**
Delhi and Bangalore	38
Phone	42
Total	**80**

Delhi is the Indian Army Headquarters and represents most arms, branches, and services. This made speaking to military personnel belonging to different arms, hierarchies, and regiments easy. Delhi also provided a wide variety of sampling, hosting both junior and senior officers' wives. Moreover, Delhi has a large population of wives whose husbands are serving in field areas, thus providing a wider

sample to engage with officer's wives living alone, away from their husbands, in Separated Family (SF)[10] accommodation. Finally, Delhi was also chosen as a field site, as I have lived most of my life in the city, in the military cantonment. I was able to take advantage of pre-existing personal connections to the field site and was confident of gaining access to and operating in the field.

Bangalore was chosen as it is a major training centre and the regimental centre of major support arms, the Army Service Corps (ASC) and the Corps of Electronics and Mechanical Engineers (EME). Bangalore houses a larger number of junior and young officers, those recently commissioned into the army, in comparison to Delhi, and for this reason, hosts "newly-weds", or junior officers' wives, who hold relatively lesser experience of military life, in comparison to more senior wives stationed in Delhi. I also had family contacts in Bangalore, which made it easy for me to reside within the cantonment and gain access to research participants.

My plans of conducting in-person interviews were interrupted due to lockdowns and travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I used telephone interviews to expand my field site and speak to officers' wives living in different army cantonments across the country. This choice further corroborates the experiences of officers' wives stationed not only in 'peace stations' such as Chandigarh, Pune, Lucknow, and Jammu (as well as Delhi and Bangalore), but also in field postings like Rajouri, Poonch, and Baramulla. It offers valuable insight into different women's experiences of living in Separated Family (SF) accommodation across various cantonments.

I did not face many logistical difficulties. The officers' wives who agreed to meet me in person did not reschedule, and interviews went ahead on scheduled days and times. A handful of officers' wives, whom I arranged to speak on the phone, rescheduled. Of the officers' wives approached for the interview, one telephone interview remains incomplete, as the military wife did not reply to my follow-up request to complete the second half of the interview, and in total, three officers' wives refused to participate when asked.

Women (at the time of the interview) either lived with their husbands, resided in separate family accommodations, away from their husbands serving in field areas, or resided with their husbands in field locations (for a short period, such as a visit or holiday). Some wives interviewed stayed with their in-laws or parents. Others had also taken up civil accommodation and, in doing so, had "opted out" of the cantonment life (Hyde 2015). While some officers' wives had chosen to stay away from their

[10] Accommodation provided by the military to the family members of officers serving in "field areas".

husbands “for the sake of their children’s education” or their professional careers, others were separated due to military requirements, such as field postings and specific appointments.

The location of officers’ wives is significant. The experiences of officers’ wives, those who married officers serving in combat arms, living in field stations (at the time of the interview) or those who had, at some point in their military life, lived in or would have to live in SF accommodation, was projected and perceived to be different to those officers’ wives who married officers serving in support arms and to women who had never seen a day of separation due to the army. These different experiences of location, for example, shaped women’s different outlooks concerning military power.

To summarise, my ‘field’ moved between, within, and around military cants, homes, settings, and checkpoints. In many ways, my fieldwork can be divided into time spent before, during, and after the fieldwork. I also resist these divisions and boundaries. This is because, while I can define my ‘before’ and during my fieldwork, I struggle with defining the end of my fieldwork. For instance, *before* I went on to the field, I framed and prepared my research questions, the questionnaire, and consent forms and engaged extensively with secondary literature. I then spent time *in the field* as I visited the army cantonment in New Delhi and lived in the army Cantonment in Bangalore. I also ‘left the field’ physically and ‘ended’ fieldwork in a semantic sense. I did not stay in touch with my participants after the interviews and returned to London. Yet, I believe I can never really *leave* my field. For this reason, I “avoid neat divisions, and allow ‘slippages’ that make the ‘before’ merge with the during… (but) the after never fully arriving” (p. 53, Mehta 2017).

Research Methods

The most important consideration in selecting research methods is ensuring that they are best suited to answering the research questions and align with the overall context of the study (Alison 2009).

Interviews

I adopted qualitative, interactive, and exploratory research methods (Bryman and Burgess 1994; Ackerly et al. 2006; Jacoby 2006). Interviews proved to be both an "ethical and effective method" as they made it possible for me to capture, "listen to, and understand women's self-descriptions" and "everyday lived experiences" (p. 21-22, Alison 2009; p. 91, Greenwood 2017; p. 24, Kazi 2007).

My decision to speak to, listen, and converse with my participants was reaffirmed at the dinner party. Mundane and ordinary conversations with military personnel, including wives in my home, and their attitudes and opinions about various social-political contexts revealed ordinarily concealed emotions (sentiments). They provided insights into women's "belief system, consciousness, and thought processes" about gender, military, and security (ibid.).

I conducted unstructured interactive, semi-structured, and structured interviews and utilised a combination of direct and open-ended interpretive questions (Greenwood 2017; Jacoby 2006). The "main difference" between these different methods is the degree to which participants have "control" over the "process and content of the interview" (p. 339, Dwyer and Buckle 2009).

I had an extensive, structured questionnaire[11] to cover four broad (personal, socio, military, and political) themes, each divided into relevant sub-sections and questions. I asked a particular question or approached a theme and the questions and then "saw where the discussion led to maximise the opportunities of participants for self-reflection" (p. 26, Alison 2009). I had a questionnaire, but "this was not used in a very strict sense. Each question was not necessarily asked in exactly the same way to each participant" (ibid.). The questions were used more as a guiding document to work from and were adapted according to each interview. During some interviews, participants addressed themes or questions I had planned to explore later, effectively anticipating my questions. At other times, their responses introduced themes not initially prompted by my questions, leading me to pursue these topics further. This required me to adapt my questioning style, allowing the conversation to flow organically while aligning with the research objective (Alison 2009; Jacoby 2006).

[11] See Appendix I

Participants were asked to tell their story as they see it, feel it, and experience it (ibid.). What this meant was that I placed ownership (in some ways) into the hands of my participants and created space for them to elaborate upon themes they considered important or interesting and steer the conversation in a direction they felt most comfortable with while remaining within the boundaries of the interview (ibid.). These insights were valuable as they helped allude to what officers' wives considered trivial or significant. Officers' wives' responses to these select themes or topics varied. Recognising and analysing the variations in wives' social and political labour to the same theme is one of the objectives of this feminist project.

For example, open-ended questions, including "What do you think is the role of an army officer's wife?", "Is there a division of domestic duties and household responsibilities in your home?" and "Do you adhere to the notion of there being the man of the house?" were asked to explore how Army officers' wives perceive and engage with power. This approach enabled participants to articulate their interpretations of military socio-cultural practices, including whether and how they perceive these as patriarchal, without being directed by pre-existing assumptions.

I also gained powerful insights from observing my participants during the interviews (Alison 2009; Ackerly et al. 2006). I picked up on undertones and observed gestures that went beyond conducting interviews[12]. I observed changes in my participants' body language and noted the pauses, the unfinished sentences, and the changes in expressions, tone, and pitch. I noticed when and how wives used paternalistic or patronising tones, sarcasm, and humour to different themes and questions. These differences in expressions, gestures and intensity of responses allowed me to understand and examine how officers' wives performed their military, gender, and other identities differently in different interview stages in response to particular questions, themes, and different spaces or contexts.

For example, my questionnaire was divided into themes. I made it a practice to inform my participants as we moved from one theme to the next — from themes and questions on the military and military life to political topics or personal life. Such signalling "prepared" the military wife for what was coming next, as many appreciated the distinctions made. This also constituted important sources of insight, as the change in themes was often met with changes in body language, responses, and reactions.

The same themes and questions evoked different emotions and responses from officers' wives. Questions on allegations against the army for misuse of power, the abrogation of Article 370, the role

[12] The eye rolls, the smirks, the dismissive shoulder shrugs, the thumping on the table, the putting away the glass, the fixing of posture, the folding of the hands, the use of air quotes, etc

of officers' wives, or their take on themes of marriage and motherhood affected officers' wives differently, evoking emotionally charged or objective and neutral responses. Some women were intrigued by the same questions and engaged with them elaborately, and others were cautious. Some remained nonchalant in their responses to the questions, while others were defensive, assertive, annoyed, and frustrated.

Most officers' wives (especially those I met in person) were extremely warm and generous with their time and space. Participants chose the site for the 'interview'. Except for two officers' wives who chose to meet me in public, women invited me to their homes for lunches, dinners, tea, and coffee. On certain occasions, with some officers' wives, conversations lasted for more than four hours, as they involved me "hanging around"[13] in my participants' homes, speaking to their military husbands and their children, and spending time with them (Mehta 2017).

These longer informal engagements with some of my participants made it possible to make a distinction between what was "formal" (structured) and "informal" (unstructured) in the context of my fieldwork.

Conversations with officers' wives on the phone (in comparison to in-person conversations) lasted for about an hour and provided less time for women to elaborately share their socio-political labour, the ways officers' wives I met in person were able to. For this reason, I distinguish between the informal, unstructured, and long, natural conversations I had with most officers' wives I met in person and the more formal interviews I conducted over the phone. This is not to suggest that conversations with officers' wives I met in person were not conducted in formal settings or that officers' wives I spoke with over the phone did not engage in long conversations. Some in-person interviews were short, lasting about an hour to an hour and a half, and did not involve me staying afterwards. In the same way, some interviews on the phone were long, natural conversations and were completed over two sessions[14] (about an hour to an hour and a half each).

[13] I engaged with officers' wives in private spaces of their homes in their dining-drawing rooms, sitting areas, verandas, terraces, balconies, and gardens while they lay the table, gave finishing touches to a dish, prepared coffee, or helped their husbands get ready for office or children for school.

[14] With regards to telephone interviews that seemed like natural conversations, I chose to divide the conversation over two sittings, as I was aware of how long it might take for me to cover all themes in the questionnaire, and seriously listen to my participants and their responses.

Moreover, the location of the interview also served as a space to understand how officers' wives performed and projected their military and gender identity differently in military, public, and private spaces while also reaffirming the success and implementation of the snowball sampling method.

For example, I had just sat down in Ravina's drawing room, had been offered cold coffee or tea, and was answering Ravina's questions about how long I had been in Delhi and what I had previously studied. She shared details of her daughter, what she was studying, where she was currently placed, and how I reminded her of *her* daughter. While we waited for the cold coffee and moved to the dining table to "start the conversation", Ravina's phone rang. Ravina answered the call while I was in the room. She explained on the call how her domestic help "had not shown up either" and cracked jokes about their dependence on "these maids" (domestic help). This was followed by a "Nothing… I am just about to start talking to that girl I told you about… she is here, so we are about to start our conversation. Umm… haan… bilkul… come"[15]. Ravina put the phone down, and not very confidently, but not sheepishly either, informed me how her neighbour was "going to be joining the conversation" and asked if this was "okay with me". I informed Ravina that I was okay with it as long as "she was okay with it" and mentioned how there were personal, sensitive, and army-related questions in the questionnaire. Ravina responded with a "Yes… that is fine."

Kavita joined our conversation after a few minutes. This conversation between these two officers' wives proved to be one of my fieldwork's most insightful experiences. The conversation lasted five hours and was a conversation, in many ways, between the two ends of the spectrum — the feminist and the non-feminist, the home-maker and the teacher, the support arm's wife and the infantry officer's wife, the mother of a son and the mother of a daughter. It helped reiterate how different officers' wives utilised the same rationales in subjective ways to engage with military-patriarchal power and occupied complex, contradictory, and overlapping standpoints concerning the larger gender and military order. Kavita and Ravina perceived their distinct relationship with power as choices they made and articulated their liberated and independent stances in relative and subjective ways.

[15] Translation: "Yes… of course… come."

Ethnography

While I conducted fieldwork, I resided in the military cantonment of Bangalore for three weeks to "observe and interact" with my research participants in their "natural setting" and "in their social and cultural context" (Alison 2009; Jacoby 2006; Krishnaraj 2006). I have observed and resided in my 'field' outside my fieldwork (Jacoby 2006)[16]. I have witnessed the *everyday* aspects of military life, spent significant periods close to members of the community, and gained first-hand experience of being a girl and a woman in "new-modern" patriarchal India. For these reasons, I label my research as an "ethnographic account" (ibid.) of Indian Army officers' wives.

[16] Shaped by my family background.

Snowball Sampling

I have had much exposure and interaction with officers' wives. This, in many ways, made entry into the field relatively easy to begin with. I began with three officers' wives I had known for many years and requested two of the officers' wives I knew to put me in touch with other officer's wives — some of whom were their friends, some were their neighbours, some used to be junior wives under their husband's command, and some were their colleagues working in the same school. Through women I knew, I got in touch with women I had never known, met, or spoken to. Of the officers' wives I met through my personal contacts, some seemed to be "very impressed" with both the subject of my research and "the ways in which I conducted the interview" with them. To further diffuse and minimise a personal connection with my participants, I asked women (whom, before the interview, I shared no personal connection with) to, if willing, put me in touch with more officer's wives — more friends, more neighbours, more colleagues.

Officers' Wives as Gatekeepers

In a way, each military wife served as a gatekeeper for my research. Access to research participants was aided by the support I received from other officers' wives who offered to help me get in touch with "a couple of friends they knew" who they thought might provide me with "interesting perspectives" or those who they believed would "have fun" speaking to me.

"Snowball sampling" proved to be an effective sampling technique as it made it possible for me to engage with "hard to reach" populations (Catignani and Basham 2021; Alison 2009). Not counting the officers' wives, I observed and casually met at various military parties, military functions, and events, I engaged with and interviewed over 80[17] officers' wives of the Indian Army whose socio-political labour, voices, opinions, worldviews, and experiences have been used to inform this research.

[17] While this study is empirically grounded in arguably quantifiable evidence, the research is interpretive and qualitative.

Confidentiality

My research is guided by feminist ethical principles of confidentiality and responsibility towards my research participants (Wickramasinghe 2010; Alison 2009; Ackerly et al. 2006).

In formal terms, I obtained ethics approval from my university. As part of this, I received an ethics training course provided by my university and completed an ethical review at the end of the first year of my registration before going on fieldwork. This approval included attention to confidentiality and how this would impact how I would conduct and store interview data.

For all interviews, I contacted the officers' wives in advance to arrange a day and time for the interview that suited them best. I conducted the interviews in the setting of my participants' choice and preference.

The participation of the officer's wives in my research was completely voluntary. All interviews were conducted with the explicit consent of my participants (ibid.). I obtained my participants' written or verbal consent and requested them to sign and submit a detailed consent form[18]. I asked permission to record the interviews and informed the participants before starting the recording. I gave them time to ask questions or clarify any concerns they might have had. Participants were informed they could, at any time, stop the interview or decline to answer any questions. My participants also knew my name, credentials, the nature of my research project, and the expected output.

I have taken the confidentiality and anonymity of my participants very seriously. The personal data gathered has been stored safely and secured by a two-stage verification process and will not be kept longer than necessary for the research (Corbin and Morse 2003). The identities of my participants remain completely unidentified and have been camouflaged using pseudonyms used to protect participant anonymity. They do not correspond to real names or identities. Any identifying descriptions or markers regarding military or personal identity that might lead to identifying any of my research participants have been changed or disguised.

[18] See Appendix II

Power Relations in the Research Process

The following section focuses on the power relations that shaped the research process and the fieldwork. Paying attention to power relations was vital as they shaped the rapport between the participants and the researcher and, accordingly, the outcome of the research (Alison 2009; Jacoby 2006). It also aided in making the act of representation "politically legitimate and valid" (to whatever degree or if at all possible) (p. 21, Kazi 2007).

More power lies in the researcher's hands when it comes to identifying, analysing, and representing data than in those of the researched (Jacoby 2006; Alison 2009; Catignani and Basham 2021). However, feminist scholarship has also established how power dynamics in the research process, especially when using participatory and interactive feminist methods like interviews, are fluid and subject to change (ibid.).

The power dynamics between my participants and myself during the fieldwork were not fixed and varied with different research participants, their (and my own) relative positions, and identities before entering and 'in' the field (ibid.).

As an example, officers' wives mundane yet symbolic acts of self-representation, how they spoke, described themselves, responded to different themes, and used "meta-statements" (p. 26, Alison 2009), including assertions like "I am very liberated" or rhetorical questions like "Do you think I am not liberated?", were "critical markers of how power was exercised" by them during the interviews (Thapan 2003). Moreover, women were aware of the contradictions in their assertions and statements. They "looked back and commented on their thoughts or something just said", highlighting their recognition of discrepancies both within themselves and in their narrations (p. 26, Alison 2009). For instance, while asserting their feminist identity, some simultaneously reinforced gendered norms, such as emphasising the necessity for girls to return home before dark. In such moments, they often paused to reflect on the incongruity of their statements, acknowledging that their words might "sound strange coming from me" given their prior assertions (p. 26, Alison, 2009).

Officers' wives were also "alert between what is expected and what is being said" (ibid.). This awareness was reflected in their use of statements such as, "You might not have been expecting this… but I have to be honest", which served as rhetorical devices to uphold or critique particular practices. These statements not only reinforced their self-awareness but also underscored the complexities of their engagement with power.

Officers' Wives' Military Identity

Officers' wives portrayed their military identity differently during the fieldwork.

Junior officers' wives, "JOs' wives" as they were called, were often younger than me. I used jokes, introduced myself, made them feel comfortable, and did not begin asking them questions at the start. I was informal, and conversations were unstructured so that I did not have to enter the theme of the military section of my questionnaire *per se*. Questions about the military and military life, such as being a military wife, in many ways, served as icebreakers to start conversations with the young women. As the conversation gained momentum, and when I felt they were engaging, comfortable, and happy to continue to speak to me, I introduced the other themes and questions.

In contrast, senior officers' wives, those who had spent a considerable amount of their lives in the military apparatus and had extensive experience of military life, wielded both their age and rank to dominate the conversation and were vocal in asserting their opinions. I conducted the interview in a more formal, structured manner, which often evolved into long, natural conversations. I started by asking my participants how long they had been in the military, but the tone was different — it was more curious than comforting.

Officers' Wives' Perception of the Research

My participants' perceptions of my research, the research hypothesis, and my motives for undertaking the research also shaped our rapport and how honest they were in how much they shared with me (Catignani and Basham 2021; Alison 2009; Jacoby 2006).

Some women perceived the PhD as a quantitative study that could be completed by collecting and completing surveys. Wives asked me to send them the "survey" and imagined it to be an "MCQ type of thing" or "a form" they had to fill out and send back. Many officers and their wives offered to help me and told me they could get my survey filled out by simply circulating the questionnaire in their respective units.

Other women complimented my subject choice and asserted the need to highlight the significance of the military wife, address the invisibility of officers' wives, and refute stereotypical understandings of officers' wives. I met women who, in many ways, I believed knew what to expect or came prepared with scripted answers to defend the military and their lives as officers' wives. Phrases such as "people who are not in the army", "non-defence", or "people in the civil will not understand" were employed by some officers' wives to explain or defend different military practices and norms.

I highlight another compelling nuance concerning the research hypothesis and themes. At the end of the conversations with officers' wives, some women had assessed the questions I had asked, the themes, and concepts I had touched on, discussed, and engaged them in. In response to their feedback on the interview, they often passed on their assessments of the themes and how I conducted myself. The fascinating dynamic I observed was how officers' wives, who had recognised the research's critical and feminist leanings, took a couple of minutes more of their time and invested more of their labour to articulate their "unequivocal" support for the military institution or emphasise the importance of 'balance' for today's generation, frequently citing feminist thought as something that should not be 'overdone.'"

My Military Identity

On the one hand, my military affiliation and knowledge became a source of trust, making it easier for the participants to engage with me more deeply and share their intimate stories or experiences of being a military wife. Most participants assumed I "was aware" and I "would know". Statements such as, "You know how it is", allowed the conversations to flow naturally and made it easier for most to share the meanings they associated with or values they attached to military power and its workings rather than explain the basics of military practice. My insider military identity also allowed me to analyse how and which military practice was specified, celebrated, negated, or omitted by my participants in their narratives.

On the other hand, my military identity also generated scepticism. It was perceived as a 'threat' by some officers' wives, who were apprehensive of my subject choice, wary of my intentions to study the military from a 'critical' 'gendered' lens, and of "how much" I knew. These officers' wives made sure to inform me or dictate to me that I "don't say anything negative about the Indian Army" or "put the army in a bad light in any sort of way". Wives expressed their "pro-institution" stances and projected themselves as "vocal defenders" of the military, as "very loyal" to the organisation.

Some officers' wives, even though they voluntarily agreed to participate, were cautious of "researchers such as myself" and the scrutiny or scepticism with which "we" perceive the military, military power, its workings, and, more importantly, military personnel and their lives (Catignani and Basham 2021). There is potential to claim that a handful of officers' wives were guarded in their responses and in representing themselves and, thus, might have presented me with scripted responses. I made this subjective assessment based on comparative analysis with other officers' wives and my long conversations with other women on the same questions and themes.

In other words, while most interviewees were open and forthcoming, revealing information that could have caused them difficulties if exposed, some women were more guarded and self-censored in their approach. Some officers' wives might have projected a favourable narrative of the military life or a partial reality of their lives in response to engaging with a military daughter and a sceptical, curious feminist and my "phrasing of the questions or the questions in itself" (Mehta 2017; Alison 2009).

Feminist ethical principles guided my decisions to include partial portrayals of participants or "scripted responses" in the research (Ackerly et al. 2006; Alison 2009). One reason is that these officers' wives consciously chose to project certain realities of their lives and labour, to share some perspectives, and to keep other outlooks hidden. These choices constituted knowledge that helped reaffirm the hypothesis of how wives consciously and actively support and uphold military or patriarchal power in

relative and subjective ways — by voicing their opinion on some practices while keeping others "hidden" (ibid.). Moreover, these conscious choices officers' wives made also helped understand women's differential sense of belonging to the gender and military order and how women identified within and beyond the military apparatus.

Limits on What I Could Ask

With officers' wives whose trust or interest I believe I could not gain, there were "limits on what or how I could say" and the kinds of questions I could ask (p. 225, Catignani and Basham 2021). I shortened the interview in such instances (Corben and Morse 2003). In a few other cases, I could not ask all the questions listed in the questionnaire due to the shortage of time.

While these were some limits to my research and fieldwork, most officers' wives were warm and welcoming and invested hours of their time and labour in my research. My participants engaged with me enthusiastically and shared their experiences concerning a range of themes, including those delicate, sensitive, and controversial. These officers' wives' time, patience and labour have made this research possible, responsible, legitimate, and relevant.

Politics of Representation: Who am I?

As what is seen, studied, or theorised and how depends on where one stands (Jacoby 2006; Basham and Bulmer 2017; Basham and Catignani 2018), my identity markers (age, education, upper-middle class military background, gender), liminal experiences (within and beyond the Indian Army and society), and shifting locations (India and the United Kingdom) shaped my positionality as a researcher. They also shaped my research hypothesis, my choice of research participants, the types of research questions asked, the kinds of research methods adopted, how data and knowledge were interpreted, and what I chose to name and title my research. My background, gender, education, and location also shape the intellectual and epistemological motivations for undertaking this interpretive critical feminist-inspired grounded research (ibid.; Charmaz 2017; Plummer and Young 2010).

"Occupying the Space Between"

Edward Ademolu (2023) highlights a long-standing critique within sociology regarding the oversimplification of researchers' 'insider' and 'outsider' positionalities in relation to the research they conduct. Drawing on Merton's (1972) work, Ademolu cautions against the overemphasis in defining the researcher's position through rigid binaries such as "'either/or' and 'familiar/unfamiliar'", arguing that such frameworks are sociologically reductive and misleading. Similarly, Miranda Alison (2009) destabilizes the notion of a "fixed" subject position, arguing that researchers, in practice, "constantly negotiate between an indefinite number of insider–outsider border zones" throughout the research process (p. 26). According to Greenwood (2017), the "insider or outsider identity of the researcher is ambiguous" and constitutes a "spectrum" of positionalities "depending on context …" (p. 99).My experience of living between cultures, my shifting identities, and the varying locations of being part of the military apparatus and those that extend beyond it have shaped my positionality as an insider, outsider, and both to my research, my field, and my participants (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Sherif 2001). I moved beyond the strict binaries of being an "insider" or an "outsider" to my research field and participants and adopted what Dwyer and Buckle have called the "space between" (Dwyer and Buckle 2009).

In other words, I moved from being a "student", "a girl doing her PhD", a "London-educated researcher", a person "who no longer lives in India", (then) an "unmarried girl", a "military daughter", a "member of the military apparatus/family", a "feminist", before entering the field, in the field, and during the writing process (Greenwood 2017; Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Alison 2009).

On the one hand, being closely associated with the military at the project's outset made me an insider to my field and most participants. My family background made it possible for me to gain relatively easy access to a field and to research participants considered "hard-to-reach populations" "immune to or wary of researchers" or outsiders (Catignani and Basham 2021). On the other hand, my participants also dismissed me as an outsider when it came to understanding the "military wife life", the "necessity" for military protocol, the significance of military practices and the importance of military presence. As another example, I was relegated as an "outsider" to the field. As a visitor, I was made to wait in my car to access the army cantonment in Delhi (the same space I had lived in most of my teenage years). In these ways, my military identity made me an insider and outsider, both to my participants and my field.

Similarly, my gender and feminist identity shaped the rapport between my participants and myself (Sherif 2001; Oakley 2016; Alison 2009). As a woman who had grown up in India, my gender made me an insider to many of my participants. It made it easier for women to share their views and for us to build a rapport. I understood and listened as a woman and shared the strengths, limitations, and vulnerabilities of being a woman (ibid.). We made jokes and laughed about men, love, menstrual cramps, marriage, children, and parents. On the other hand, my feminist leanings and perspectives also made me an outsider to some officers' wives, who made sure to "correct" my ways of thinking or beliefs that *they* gathered from *my* research questions or conversations generally.

Moving between my military and gender identities allowed me to tap into various segments of my interlocutors' lives, their worlds, and perspectives. They also allowed me to diffuse (as much as possible) power relations that arose between my participant and myself.

Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions

This study's epistemological and ontological stances are rooted in critical military studies (Basham and Bulmer 2017; Basham et al. 2015), feminist epistemologies (Hansen 2010; Weldon 2006; Harding 1987, 1992), feminist grounded theory (Charmaz 2017; Wuest 1995, 2012, Plummer and Young 2010) and feminist standpoint theory (Kronsell 2005, 2010; Hartsock 2019; Harding 1987; Brooks 2006).

Critical Military Studies

This research adopts Critical Military Studies (CMS) as both a "methodological approach" and a "research method" for studying the relationship between gender and military institutions and the "everyday lived experiences" of those touched by military power (p. 69, Basham and Bulmer 2017).

While firmly committed to critiquing and challenging militarisation in all its forms, Critical Military Studies (CMS) as a subfield resist defining what such critique or "resistance might look like or how it might be constituted" (p. 60, Basham and Bulmer 2017). Instead, CMS encourages a praxis-oriented approach that promotes an openness to engage with military institutions, practices, and the individuals who "inhabit" them, intending to contribute to change (p. 60-64, Basham and Bulmer 2017).

Moreover, CMS is relevant to this research for its particular and distinct focus on "methodological plurality" and the "politics of positionality" compared to traditional social scientific approaches that study the military (p. 2, Basham et al. 2015). CMS approaches foreground reflexivity, emphasising the importance of critically examining one's ways of seeing and interpreting the world. It also recognises the "complex and contradictory" positionality of the research subjects (p. 61-62, Basham and Bulmer 2017). Crucially, CMS challenges the notion that only researchers can be "critical" of military power and its workings. They recognise individuals sharing proximity to military power and conditions critique and reflect on their own experiences of militarisation (p. 68, Basham and Bulmer 2017). Furthermore, CMS approaches prioritise fieldwork and embrace the "messy" and often complex nature of "qualitative, interpersonal" research encounters (p. 2, Basham et al. 2015).

Feminist Epistemologies

This study contests the assumed irrelevance of women in global affairs and instead recognises women as legitimate producers and holders of knowledge (Harding 1987; Hansen 2014; Weldon 2006).

Gendered agency has been conceptualised and understood from a liberal feminist perspective, which acknowledges the role of socialisation and institutional structures in shaping agency but also focuses on the individual capacity to make decisions and make choices within existing social and institutional conditions (Shepherd 2010; p. 415-416, Rao 2015; Soman 2009).

Liberal feminists pursue two strategies in international relations: one highlights women's underrepresentation in traditional domains of global politics, such as security and diplomacy. The other seeks to recover women's roles that have been overlooked, recognising that women were, and are, present as workers, nurses, peace activists, and even combatants. This dual strategy positions agency as both the right to be included and the act of making oneself visible in systems that have historically ignored or excluded women. For example, as Whitworth documents, women have been vastly underrepresented in arms control and disarmament decision-making, not only due to institutional barriers but also due to societal norms that discourage women from engaging with "masculine" topics like war and security. In this context, a woman choosing to pursue a career in these fields or asserting herself within them is exercising agency by resisting gendered expectations and claiming space within dominant political structures. These "liberal" feminist perspectives inform this study's conceptualisation of gendered agency by recognising and emphasising the political significance of gendered labour (Thapan 1995; Whitworth 1994).

Feminist Grounded Theory

Scholars such as Judith Wuest (1995), Marilyn Plummer, and Lynne E. Young (2010) have highlighted the "epistemological affinity" between feminist inquiry and grounded theory, proposing feminist grounded theory as a methodological approach for studying women's lived experiences.

Such approaches centre women's "subjective interpretations" of social experiences as valid knowledge, challenge traditional "subject-object dualism", and emphasise the importance of reflexivity and the relational dynamic between researcher and participant. Feminist grounded theory relies on inductive reasoning, allowing concepts and "theories to emerge from empirical data" rather than imposing pre-existing hypotheses. Through coding, researchers identify recurring themes and generate analytical categories that reflect the complexity of participants' social realities (p. 306-308, p. 311-313, Plummer and Young 2010; p. 229-230, Wuest 1995).

Standpoint Feminism

This study is also rooted in Standpoint feminism (Kronsell 2005; Hartsock 2019; Harding 1987). While traditionally, feminist standpoint theory has challenged traditional, state-centric masculine approaches by focusing on women in marginalised positions, feminist scholars have extended this to include women in institutions of hegemonic masculinity such as the militaries (such as Kronsell 2005).

Contemporary feminist standpoint scholars have "modified" and "revitalised" traditional feminist standpoint theory and its strict focus on the experiences of marginalised or "less privileged women" to understand the world. Instead, they acknowledge that women have diverse and multiple standpoints shaped by their specific social and personal contexts (Kronsell 2005; Hesse-Biber et al. 2007). These scholars argue that every woman's "standpoint" is valuable, and it is through recognising the "differences, diversity, and even conflict between women's experiences" that we can learn more about society at large (p. 75, Hesse-Biber et al. 2007). Rather than ignoring or flattening these differences, feminist scholars are encouraged to create "a space where women's different and multiple standpoints are granted equal airtime" (p. 70-71, ibid.).

Annica Kronsell (2005) has examined women's experiences within institutions of hegemonic masculinity to understand embedded gendered dynamics better. She critiques the tendency within feminist epistemology to overlook or dismiss the knowledge that women gain from working within these traditionally masculine institutions:

> *"The increasing number of women located within or close to the elite are not marginalised yet and occupy these institutions as a minority. Standpoint theory's tendency to emphasise knowledge generated by women only in particular 'spaces' has led to the implication that an occasional woman with power is either a 'male' in disguise or a mere 'token'... Women within institutions of hegemonic masculinity have been perceived either as co-opted or too few to be representative of women's knowledge and standpoint. Yet, I would argue that knowledge generated 'inside' institutions of hegemonic masculinity can be extremely valuable for feminist knowledge production. Women as officers and as conscripts, (through their) everyday practices within hegemonic institutions make visible abstract notions of masculinity, and embedded gendered norms. When a woman, whether feminist or not, becomes part of an all-male organisation, her mere presence makes those norms." (p. 285, p. 289-91, Kronsell 2005)*

Epistemologically, standpoint feminists focus on lived experience as a key source of knowledge, combining attention to both structural forces and everyday experiences to understand social processes, institutional practices, or specific phenomena (p. 22-25, Hansen 2014). They adopt a "constructivist" view of gender and treat femininity and masculinity as "social constructions" (ibid.). At the same time, standpoint feminism recognises women as "concrete subjects" in inquiry and locates them and their lived realities at the "centre of analysis" (ibid.).

Feminist standpoint theory, feminist grounded theory, and bottom-up analysis, driven by inductive reasoning, shaped this study's research design and logic of inquiry, i.e., the process of interpretation and knowledge construction in moving from the data to the analysis.

I transcribed and systemised 80 interviews between April 2020 and December 2022. As my questionnaire was extensive and conversations with officers' wives were long and insightful, my transcript and the volume of my field research, which included unheard perspectives, were large and challenging to comprehend. Given the space restriction, it is impossible to represent the knowledge gained as part of my fieldwork, i.e., highlight all of my participants' responses to the themes, questions, and topics covered in the questionnaire. I have also shortened or paraphrased long-winded answers or lengthy responses to save space while ensuring the participants' original meaning and intention are not obfuscated, altered, or misrepresented (p. 20-23, Kazi 2007). In this respect, and to this extent, my interpretation and reproduction of officer's wives' labour is "consistent with the respondent's experience and point of view, with little scope for interpretive error" (p. 24, Kazi 2007). Moreover, the significance and meaning of all participants' socio-political labour have been used to inform the broader hypothesis. The themes covered and interview extracts highlighted in the scholarship testify to how officers' wives employ different rationales to engage with military patriarchal power in complex ways.

Using a feminist lens, I designed open and selective codes, categories, and labels to identify recurring patterns — common or similar responses, thought processes, outlooks, attitudes, and phrases without treating my participants' socio-political labour as synonymous (Plummer and Young 2010; Wuest 1995). As coding progressed, specific themes and patterns emerged with regard to the perceptions and opinions of military spouses and how they self-identified (ibid.).

Conversations with my supervisor, reflexive memoing, and note-taking supplemented the coding process and informed the selection of themes highlighted in this scholarship (ibid.). For example, soon after leaving the interview setting, I reflected on the interview whenever possible. I noted key phrases and specific responses or opinions and used notes in my diary to highlight similarities as the fieldwork

progressed. These practices helped me comprehend copious data and make “ethically grey decisions” of choosing and selecting from my participants’ socio-political labour and deciding what to represent in the scholarship (Alison 2009; Kazi 2007).

The recurring patterns that emerged from the analysis of the empirical data were foundational to building theory and developing the analytical and conceptual frameworks proposed in this study.

Feminist standpoint theory, feminist grounded theory, and bottom-up, inductive analysis were central to conceptualising agency as “choice” and positioning women as individuals with the capacity to shape their lives and labour.

Similarly, the spectrum of gendered socio-political labour, articulated through archetypes and rationales, is grounded in empirical insights and informed by inductive reasoning, feminist standpoint approaches, ethnographic insights, and relevant secondary literature.

What Makes Research Feminist?

I identify as feminist in my approach and politics and write as a feminist. At the same time, what it means to be a feminist scholar and adopt a feminist approach remains fluid. In this sense, I accept the diversity and nuance behind the single label of "feminist" (Hooks 2000; Alison 2009). This study understands feminisms in the "plural", recognising the diversity of feminist thought while upholding a shared commitment to justice and progressive change (Woodward and Duncanson 2017; Harding 1987). While there is no single feminist methodology or set of uniquely feminist methods, there are feminist-informed methodological approaches that guide this research (Harding 1987; Ackerly et al. 2006).

Feminist methodologies take all women seriously and regard their lived experiences as valuable sources of knowledge for political and social analysis — whether those experiences reflect insight, courage, and innovation or complicity, intolerance, and self-interest (Enloe 2014; Alison 2009; Catignani and Basham 2021).

Feminist methodological approaches challenge "positivist" traditions, particularly the notion that research methods can be entirely "objective" or that researchers can remain "value-neutral" (Alison 2009; Catignani and Basham 2021; Jacoby 2006). Feminist scholars argue that all research is inherently "situated" and influenced by the researcher's position and lived experiences (ibid.). They advocate for research practices that explicitly acknowledge and analytically locate the feminist researcher within the research process and the broader context of knowledge production, placing a strong emphasis on reflexivity (ibid.).

Feminist approaches integrate activism with research as they use people's everyday lives, practices, and experiences to produce knowledge that is "practical", "useful", and can be used to "make a difference" in practice rather than solely advancing theory (p. 33, Alison 2009; p. 29 Tickner 2006). Feminist scholars also tend to prioritise qualitative methods, such as ethnography and unstructured or semi-structured interviews, over quantitative approaches, as these methods are better suited to capturing the complexity of lived experiences (Alison 2009; Ackerly et al. 2006).

For these reasons — its attention to positionality, commitment to qualitative methods, grounding in feminist epistemologies, and centring of the lived experiences of women who are often overlooked — this research constitutes a feminist project aimed at producing grounded knowledge that seeks to make a difference.

Chapter Five: The Officer's Wife and the Micro-Politics of Military Power

This study acknowledges that "no one can ever be fully aware of the conditions of their own construction" (Thapan 1995). It does not assume that Indian Army officers' wives are necessarily conscious of the feminist and CMS critiques underpinning this research. However, it challenges the assumption that officers' wives are entirely 'unaware' of the pervasive nature of socialisation and institutionalisation, or that their investment in the military and gender order is merely a product of "false consciousness" (Hyde 2015; Soman 2009; Dube 1988).

Officers' wives expressed a strong awareness of patriarchal norms and social relations, often reflecting on their transformation over time. They attributed these shifts to broader processes such as modernisation, feminism, and globalisation. Some women acknowledged the socio-cultural privileging of boys and recognised India's deeply entrenched patriarchal structures shaped by patrilineal descent. They discussed changes in family dynamics, particularly the shift from joint to nuclear family systems, and reflected on the persistence of gendered authority within domestic spaces. Several officers' wives described the emergence of the "modern Indian woman" — an assertive, career-oriented individual who seeks an equitable division of household labour, often through the employment of domestic help. While some women spoke of tensions with their mothers-in-law, others emphasised more harmonious relationships; however, nearly all acknowledged the mother-in-law's pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of marriage. Notably, some officers' wives asserted that they embody this role differently from their predecessors, pointing to a perceived generational shift in gendered familial expectations. Others evaluated and narrated how they believed they had upheld or challenged patriarchal social norms, customs or divisions in their everyday personal, marital, and familial lives.

Much like cultural socialisation, officers' wives were acutely aware of the pervasive nature of structural institutionalism — particularly how the Indian Army, through its rank structure and unwritten policies, shaped the everyday lives of military personnel. They consciously and critically reflected on their roles as military wives and assessed the degree to which they believed the Indian army shaped their lives. Many officers' wives reflected on how they believed the army had "changed over the years". Women described how the institution had become less rigid over time, spoke of evolving fashion trends, highlighted the increasing number of working officers' wives, and noted the reduced pressure on women to participate in military activities and social functions.

Of particular significance was how women were aware of and frequently invoked the constructed image of the "Indian Army officer's wife" as someone who was "glamorous", "elegant", "poised", and

held a “unique” and “prestigious” social position within the military apparatus and in the larger socio-cultural landscape of India. They selectively mobilised these framings and various aspects of their identities and positionalities—such as age, familial civil-military background, experiences of separation, proximity to conflict or border zones, educational qualifications, professional occupations, exposure to civil society, and relationships with their children and husbands—to engage with, support, be liminal to, or critique power across different spaces.

These insights are crucial as they evidence that, while officers’ wives operate within deeply engrained processes of socialisation and institutionalisation, they are nonetheless aware of the mechanisms through which such practices are maintained, perpetuated, and transformed. Their awareness of how the forces of socialisation and institutionalisation operate and are reproduced, combined with their socio-cultural capital, elite and privileged positioning within the military and broader Indian society, underscores a vantage point from which to understand the potential of gendered labour and power and to uphold and critique the durability and ubiquity of military and patriarchal power.

Moreover, the social positioning of officers’ wives is crucial to understanding how intersecting factors such as family background, education, and class influence how women self-identify and shape their perceptions of, and engagement with, notions of gendered agency, the ideologies of patriarchy, feminism, and the experiences liberation in relative and subjective ways.

The majority of officers’ wives interviewed for this research were Hindu, reflecting the religious demographic composition of India. Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, and Jain women were also interviewed. While caste identity is beyond the scope of this study, some officers’ wives voluntarily asserted or described their caste affiliations when discussing socio-cultural practices. Officers’ wives were well-educated, often holding undergraduate or postgraduate degrees, with some possessing professional qualifications in fields such as teaching, law, medicine, and engineering. This high level of education aligns with the upper echelons of Indian society, where an English-medium education serves as a significant marker of social status.

I interviewed women who identified as housewives and homemakers. Women also worked from home as entrepreneurs, nutritionists, freelance fitness instructors, dieticians, and spiritual healers. Teaching emerged as a popular profession among most officers’ wives who “chose” to participate in paid labour. It was perceived as a profession that made it “possible” or “easier” for officers’ wives to “balance” their domestic, familial, and military responsibilities alongside their professional aspirations. While many officers’ wives worked as teachers intermittently in different schools and cities, some resumed

work after their children started attending school. In contrast, others quit their teaching jobs for family or military responsibilities.

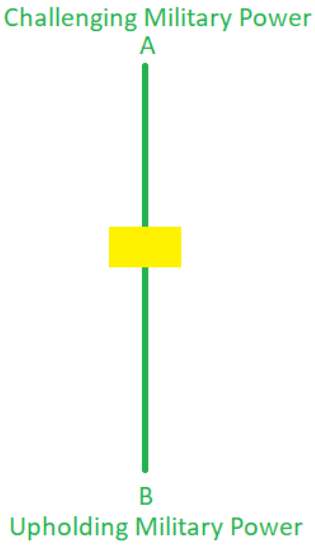
Moreover, while the pathway to enter the military social order, i.e. becoming a military wife, varies, empirical narrations make clear that for many, entry into the military apparatus and marrying a military man constituted a matter of active choice and decision-making, influenced by personal, familial, and societal factors, rather than mere circumstance. Women interviewed aspired to marry an officer, appreciating the uniform, the discipline, and the service to the nation. Some women, particularly those who had been daughters of officers, entered into this life with full awareness of what it entails. Their upbringing within military families provided them with a clear understanding of military culture and practices, thus making their choice a well-informed one. On the other hand, there are women who, though not previously connected to the military through a family military background, were attracted by its perceived aura and prestige. These women, while perhaps less informed about the specifics of military life at the outset, were driven by a desire for prestige, social status, and even an expression of patriotism. They, too, made a deliberate decision to marry into the military or a military man. It is important to distinguish between women who enter these marriages through arranged unions and those who do so through personal choice. Women in arranged marriages often shared having little prior knowledge of military life and its implications. Their initial entry into the military apparatus may indeed seem more circumstantial. However, the subsequent support, critique, or liminality of the military wife's role becomes their expression of agency.

This chapter now introduces the participants of the study who, as officers' wives, exemplify engagement with the "micro-politics" of military power (Hyde 2015). Gendered narrations and reflections depict how different officers' wives, through the rationales of "security", "self-identifications", familial framings, and changing times, engage with and understand the operations of military power in complex, overlapping, and contradictory ways.

The objective of conducting a gendered analysis of military power is to highlight three key points. First is the distinct and respective interpretation of different military practices were officer wives' expressions of choice (agency). Second, the chapter pays attention to women's self-descriptions and how they use these to differentiate themselves from "other" women (those in the military and larger Indian society). Third, the chapter highlights how officers' wives, through their socio-political labour, uphold and critique the durability and ubiquity of military practices and expectations in the everyday.

The Military Power Axis

Figure 3. The Military Power Axis



The military power (AB) axis (figure 2) will help acknowledge and map the diversity of gendered labour concerning military power. This chapter will illustrate how officers' wives associated themselves firmly with either extreme of the AB axis by challenging (A) or supporting (B) the micro-politics of military power. Officers' wives, alternatively, also *move* on the military power (AB) axis, as they simultaneously challenge and support military power in different micro-spaces or to some extent.

Loyalist Officers' Wives

Being supportive is a matter of national security

Preeti was very welcoming and generous with her time. Preeti invited me warmly to her home for lunch, which involved us sitting in her garden for over five hours. During the long, natural conversation Preeti and I had, she shared intimate stories of her life with me. She explained in detail her thoughts on the role of a military wife, including military duties, responsibilities, and practices.

Preeti wielded her military family background, being a part of the military apparatus as an army daughter, and her combat military identity as a military wife. Preeti did so to explain how the role of the military wife "change(d) with rank, the branch of service" or with the nature of the military "appointment" of the military husband (at a given time). She then concluded her assessment of the "role of an army officer's wife" by putting forward her combat military identity:

> *T: What do you think is the role of an army officer's wife?*
>
> *Preeti: Especially being an Infantry wife, it is very important to be (supportive), to ensure that the husband is free of all the tension in the home, the kids, the schools, (family relations), the children's careers…*

The casual yet affirmative association of the military wife with gendered roles, such as providing support or playing the supportive role, and with gendered divisions — including the home, family, and children — was reiterated by other officers' wives, such as Jyoti. She attributed playing gendered roles and upholding gendered divisions to national security and military effectiveness.

Jyoti was a serving officer in the Indian Army. She was the daughter of a military officer and a serving officer's wife. Jyoti wielded her mother's experiences as a military wife married to a combat officer, explaining the "supportive" role she believed the military wife played in the apparatus. Jyoti reiterated Preeti's assertion and emphasised how officers' wives whose husbands served in combat arms, in particular, had to experience separation and had to "live alone" and "manage things independently". She affirmed the "special" need for infantry wives to be "supportive" and "independent". Jyoti then compared her mother's experience to her own experience as a wife married to an officer of the support arms. She did this to distinguish between the role of officers' wives whose husbands were serving in "field areas" and the role of wives whose husbands were serving in "peace stations":

> *T: What do you think is the role of an army officer's wife?*

> *Jyoti: The first and foremost task is to ensure he does not have to worry about things happening outside his official scope so that he can focus on his military career. We are taking care of the back end so he can work at the front end. If these officers are worried about things happening at home, it becomes extremely difficult to focus on the task at hand.*

Jyoti, in these ways, nonchalantly associated women-as-wives with the domestic arena and men with the public arena. She also stressed the necessity to uphold and maintain gendered divisions of the "back end" and the "front end" in the name of national security, allowing military officers to serve in border areas peacefully.

Regardless of whether they married officers from the support or combat arms, different officers' wives, such as Preeti and Jyoti, supported traditional gendered roles or divisions associated with army wives in the name of military effectiveness and national security. Both believed the officer's wife's role was to "be supportive", "provide" a "tension-free" environment for their husband, and "ensure he comes back to a happy home". Women affirmed how wives' ability to "hold the fort", "handle", and "manage" the home front and the family, and "be independent" was necessary and crucial for military effectiveness, national security, and what made it possible or ensured the military officers could "give" their "100% to the organisation", "focus" on their military "tasks at hand", and "take forward the military career".

An unhappy spouse is the worst…

While some officers' wives, like Preeti, ascribed a mythical dimension to the belief that a wife's participation in the military apparatus influences her officer-husband's career trajectory—describing it as "something" she had "heard over the years"— others, such as Jyoti, said they were unaware of such practices and intended to "verify this" with their husbands (and follow up).

Tanvi was amongst those officers' wives who not only mentioned the voluntary practice of assessing spouses' contributions and attitudes towards military apparatus or military responsibility. She not only believed women had a "specific role in the army", which involved "bringing people together". Tanvi supported gendered control exercised through military practices while negating them as forms of gendered control. Asserting "a man can only be as happy as his wife is", she defended and supported the "military couple as a whole" being "assessed" by senior military personnel in the name of military effectiveness. Her response was insightful and self-explanatory:

Tanvi: They must assess the couple as a whole. What if that 'idiotic' type of woman is the General's wife? Then, she will create mayhem. (Being) happily married (is important). If she creates a nuisance at home, he is always stressed about his house. An unhappy spouse is the WORST thing you can have. It makes it difficult for her husband to give his 100%.

Tanvi's rationale for supporting gendered control wielded through military power to keep "idiotic" women "in check" was reiterated by other officers' wives, such as Richa and Heena.

Heena had been married to an infantry officer for more than two decades. She reinforced women's supportive role and its relationship to the military officer having a successful military career. Heena compared the military "couple in the army" to "a cart with two wheels". She proudly shared how she "overcame hurdles" in her military life and how she had "never cribbed" despite her "husband never being around to help her move houses". Heena wielded her experience to assert the necessity of having an "ambitious wife in the army" but also declared how not having an ambitious spouse in the army might result in the husband "lagging" while projecting "belonging to an old school of thought" as her expression of agency:

T: How do you feel about the practice of voluntary assessment?

Heena: I could have made my husband's life miserable if I wanted to... Behind every successful man, there may be a woman, but behind every ruined man, there is definitely a woman.

A woman has to create an environment to make her husband comfortable so he can do well in life. If they (women) married an army man and chose to be a part of the army life, they have to work for it. The couple in the army is like a cart with two wheels. If even one of them stops working, your career will come to a halt. It will just stagger (in these ways). I (belong to the) old school of thought.

Richa similarly supported voluntary gendered practices such as assessing women's attitudes towards military duty. Richa reasserted the role of the army wife in ensuring the husband is stress-free. Unlike Heena, Richa did not imagine her support for military practice to be about "ambition" but about "commitment" to the military profession. Richa first took pride in declaring how the "husband as an officer is married to the army first". She stressed the "very important role" she believed women played in "ensuring the peace of mind" of their military husbands. She then referred to the military couple as

"a complete package", explained how "the man cannot function in isolation as an officer", and deemed gendered practices "important to keep a check on marital discords":

> *T: How do you feel about the practice of voluntary assessment?*
>
> *Richa: It is important. My husband told me in so many words that I would always be second in his priorities. This was not about ambition but more to do with commitment. It is the wife's responsibility to give him the space to meet his commitments. He should not be worried about family matters, children or his parents, and that is where the wife has an essential role to play.*

Richa associated the military wife with the private, domestic, and familial arena. She, once again, defended gendered roles in the name of military effectiveness, i.e. what makes it possible for the husband to commit himself to the military profession.

In these ways, officers' wives, such as Tanvi, Heena, and Richa, defended and supported gendered roles, divisions, and practices in the name of both military and personal security as a means to ensure military effectiveness, mitigate marital discord, and achieve a successful military career. Their narratives illustrate how women derived genuine satisfaction and made conscious efforts to be a "model" military wife.

Working for the military

In addition to playing a supportive role, officers' wives explained another "important" role of the army officer's wife. Gendered narratives made clear and detailed how officers' wives "worked" (or were expected to work) for the army (by other officers' wives and military personnel). It was not just the ability of the army wife to invest her emotional labour in the apparatus, in "bringing people together" or "ensuring" the military officer was "stress-free"; that was what was assessed by other officers' wives and senior military hierarchy. Women also brought the ability and willingness of the 'military wife' to invest her (physical, intellectual, and emotional) unpaid labour in the military apparatus under the preview of playing the supportive role. Gendered contributions were believed to play a "role", if not a decisive role, "in making or breaking" the officer's military career.

As has been previously outlined, officers' wives interviewed frequently emphasised their "cultured", "well-educated", and "open-minded" family backgrounds and framed their upbringings as "modern" in comparison to soldiers' wives of the Indian Army. They used these framings to detail the specific

role they played in the army, “providing” and “ensuring” the “welfare of the soldiers’ wives and their families” through the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA), which many women referred to as a “kind of an NGO”.

In the name of women’s empowerment

Jyoti, while being a serving officer herself, once again wielded her mother’s upper-middle class background to detail another important role of the military wife:

> *Jyoti: In the army, the officers do a remunerated job of quintessentially protecting the nation, but the aspect of the welfare of the families is taken care of completely by the wives.*

Jyoti established “welfare” as “a charity job”. She explained how “none of these ladies get paid for it”. She then detailed how officers’ wives as women holding social and military capital helped soldiers’ wives become “independent and capable”. She defended welfare provided in the name of military effectiveness:

> *Jyoti: There are times when I have seen my mother work more than my father. They are going on outreach programmes. ‘We’ (officers’ wives) have support from our families when our husbands are away. They (soldiers’ wives) need to be given that kind of support from ‘us’ (officers’ wives) when their husbands are away, as the soldiers’ wives also need to commit to the idea of being supportive wives. If they don’t, their husband’s lives also become difficult.*

Jyoti ended her assessment of the role of an army officer’s wife by declaring the “role has to be played with a lot of diligence”. She also produced and treated military practices such as welfare and the welfare role of an army wife as “opportunities to contribute to society”. Moreover, Jyoti shared how she was critical of “the new generation of officers’ wives” and how *they* treated “welfare as a burden”. She asked these youngsters to “put complaints aside”, invest their labour in the apparatus, and “play the role of supporting the families of the troops” in the name of military cohesion.

Tanvi had completed her undergraduate degree in journalism and held a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) qualification. She had worked “on and off” over the years in different schools and explained how her ‘choice’ to take up employment was shaped by her children’s ages or her husband’s military appointments. She similarly elaborated on and emphasised the “empowering” and “objective” role of

AWWA. Tanvi helps illustrate how officers' wives often draw on their educational backgrounds to position themselves as "mentors" to soldiers' wives. It also evidences how investing unpaid voluntary labour in the apparatus and fulfilling military responsibility, such as "welfare", were imagined by officers' wives as spaces for granting soldiers' wives "empowerment" opportunities. Tanvi also imagined welfare as a framework to assert her agency — her "choices" about the military role and responsibility (military power).

In response to the role of an army officer's wife, Tanvi responded:

> *Tanvi: Our role is not just to look pretty, keep a good house and throw nice parties. I actually firmly believe in the empowerment which AWWA gives, but there are few like me.*

Tanvi first explained the objective behind welfare — to "empower" the soldier's wives and make soldiers' wives "(financially) independent". She then elf-assessed and echoed a sentiment voiced by many other officers' wives. Tanvi utilised the *changing times* framework to establish how she believed "the army (and welfare) had changed with time". Tanvi made this relative comparison of welfare in the present-day army to elaborate on how the Indian military had discontinued archaic practices such as "teaching women stitching, sewing, cooking, and embroidery" in association with providing welfare.

Tanvi then took her time and detailed how in "(some) stations", the army, through welfare, had introduced "outreach programmes", "parlour courses, computer education, (and) advanced studies for the ladies" to "make" women "independent. At the same time, she asserted how in other stations women were being encouraged to "write cheques, visit banks, deal with finances" or "take driving lessons". The "objective" of these efforts according to Tanvi, those echoed by other officers' wives, was to encourage" soldiers' wives to "take up jobs" and "keep themselves busy when their husbands were away", and to provide women with "soft skills" or "vocational training" so that they can "support themselves".

In the name of change

Tanvi did not end her assessment of welfare there. She narrated how she "chose not to work" (in a school) in a particular station. Instead, Tanvi voluntarily "took English speaking classes" and performed her military duty like it was her "job" or her "passion". This mindset, she believed, made her "unlike other officer's wives". Tanvi utilised education and military hierarchy and produced herself as

a welfare agent who brought "meaningful change" when she could — when her husband was of a particular rank through which she was in a "position" of power and took pride in undertaking *her* military responsibility "sincerely":

> *Tanvi: When he was ___. I did it like a passion. Mind you, there was nobody watching. Our (senior officer's) wife was not there. There was no pressure from the station to do anything.*

Tanvi made clear how the military hierarchy shaped the ability to bring meaningful change through welfare or act as a welfare agent. Her experiences also hint at wives' unpaid voluntary contributions and connections with military husbands' career progression.

More critically, Tanvi rejected the notion that her support for soldiers' wives was motivated by the desire to earn favour or "brownie points" from the senior hierarchy that could potentially benefit her husband's promotion. Tanvi recognised welfare as a "God-given opportunity to look after families". She also attributed the "love, respect, and satisfaction" she gained from undertaking her military responsibility passionately to be "paramount". Moreover, she wielded her choice to support welfare, to prescribe how other women should engage with welfare. Tanvi proudly declared how she "told" her "ladies" "never" to "crib" about welfare or the time and the participation welfare demands and rationalised this declaration in the name of military and personal security. She imagined the military as a benevolent benefactor that provided military personnel material, symbolic incentives, or "privileges", such as "a sense of security, respect, status, a house, a secure living environment, etc". She encouraged and expected women to invest their unpaid labour in return for these privileges, deeming "power without responsibility" to be "the prerogative of the harlot":

> *Tanvi: They say that power without responsibility is the prerogative of the harlot, so it gives you so much power, and when you get responsibility, then you sit and crib about it, which is very sad.*

In addition to portraying the military as a benevolent benefactor, Tanvi also conceptualised the military as a family and the military hierarchy as a form of familial authority. The "Commanding Officer of the unit" was compared to a "father figure". At the same time, the wielding of rank by senior ladies, particularly when seniors were rude, was likened to familial dynamics, such as "mothers shouting". Tanvi not only utilised these familial framings to encourage women "not to feel bad" about the wielding of rank by senior officers' wives but also invoked the family parallel to encourage women to invest their labour in the "military family".

In the name of social security

In addition to providing and ensuring welfare through AWWA, Heena, discussed the social role of an army wife, including organising, facilitating, coordinating, and participating in gendered events, such as Ladies' Meets.

In many ways, Heena summarised the sentiments shared by most officers' wives. While acknowledging that Ladies' Meets were rooted in class and rank hierarchies — being exclusively for wives of men serving in the officer cadre of the Indian Army — she explained how these gendered events served as "social platforms" for officers' wives to "mix and mingle… interact socially… and get to know one another". Heena rationalised gendered participation in the name of social security and as a means to sustain social cohesion. She then declared "social interaction" (cohesion) to be a "lever in the army". Heena believed and elaborated how "cohesive activities" (through such gendered events) brought women "closer" to one another, helped "gain trust, friendships and loyalty", and simultaneously deemed cohesion to be crucial for the military profession.

Preeti echoed the socialisation and interaction function or objective associated with such gendered events. Preeti treated military events as spaces for "different women" to showcase their talents, dressing styles, and fashion trends and as "chances" for women to "grow their social circle" and "meet ladies from the entire station".

Grooming is what makes the military wife different

Richa, in response to the question, "What is your take on the new generations of women coming into the army?" made the following assessment:

> *Richa: The entire new lot of young girls coming into the army, barring a few, are unwilling to adapt to the army way of life… the kinds of clothes they wear, the kinds of conversations they have, their conduct … it is unbecoming of an army officer's wife. The biggest challenge is to train and groom these women.*

Richa narrated an incident that involved her (as a senior lady) "grooming" a young officer's wife. She asked a young lady not to "gossip about the unit". In sharing this story, Richa not only compared the military to a family but also asserted the significance of officers' wives in upholding the "reputation" of the "unit" as a family:

Richa: The army is like a family to you. If anything happens to you tomorrow, this family will come to support you. You must learn how to keep your priorities in check.

A matter of legacy and tradition

Heena explained she did not need to be groomed as she "was from a military background" and was aware of "what was expected". She knew she had to be "constrained, less talkative and courteous". Heena deemed grooming to be "very important for girls who come from a civilian background", whom she held had "no exposure" to the army. She detailed what the practice entailed, reiterating *who* was responsible for grooming:

T: What is your take on the practice of grooming in the army?

Heena: I think you have to ask the ladies how I groomed them (laughs)… the senior officers' wives educate and groom the young girls coming into the army and what is expected of them. Senior wives teach the junior officers' wives the parameters they ought to follow along with the husbands who also need to groom their wives.

Heena referred to grooming as "parameters" (limits). However, she did not imagine being "constrained" as restrictions imposed on her or other officers' wives. Heena simultaneously trivialised and defended gendered control by imagining and framing it as a form of familial control — wielded by mothers and sisters in private spaces. Moreover, for Heena, being an "orthodox military wife" constituted an expression of her agency concerning military power. She believed military "norms" and "protocols" are what made the military wife "a role model" and "different from the rest of the society":

Heena: As a junior officer's wife, I can always respect the senior lady for her age. I respect my mother and elder sister, don't I? The same way senior ladies will tell me off if they think I am doing something wrong or incorrect.

For Tanvi military practices such as grooming constituted as "traditions", "protocols", and "norms" of the Indian Army that were essential to "maintain its spirit and discipline" and defended control in the name of upholding military "legacy". Tanvi envisioned her "love" for "formalities" as an expression of her agency and believed "laid down norms" made "the military wife different":

T: What is your take on the practice of grooming in the army?

Tanvi: I love the tradition of the army, the norms of respect. I love formalities. I thrive in them. I don't have a problem with these disciplinary patterns. They are necessary because they make you (officer's wives) different… dekho ek fauj ki jo tarkeeb hai, jo Dastoor hai, usko change nahi karna chahiye[19].

Preeti recalled how she was "groomed in a very nice manner" by both the senior officer's wife and her husband. She narrated how she "had a habit of having a loose tongue" but also added how she was "not rebuked but taught a lesson" by a particular senior military wife.

Jyoti while labelling grooming as "mentorship", deemed the practice to be "extremely important both for the officer and the wife". She rationalised her emphasis by declaring "the army" to be a "different world in itself". Jyoti stressed how military personnel's public and private lives get blurred within the military apparatus and how "friends" of military personnel are "colleagues" in the army:

T: What is your take on the practice of grooming in the army?

Jyoti: Because being in the army is very different from a job in the civil (where) once you leave the office, your job stops there… to become a part of that world… it is almost like gaining citizenship into this world. Someone has to tell you about the rules of this world, and, unlike the civil world, where you can do what you want and have your way.

Whether you like it or not, this world runs by rules, and you have to abide by them, as every action of yours has a domino effect. I am required to wear a certain kind of attire whether I like it or not. I cannot fight for 'rights', so to say… I am bound by certain rules and regulations.

Jyoti recognised officers' wives were "bound" by "rules and regulations". However, she also did not imagine "bindings" as "constraints" but as "guiding principles", as mediums to gain "respect", and as necessary "protocols" "of the army crucial "or upholding "military discipline and "decorum". She continued:

Jyoti: You have to understand that these bindings are not to pull you down but to bring a certain sense of similarity and respect for an organisation. You cannot take it personally. Of course, there are instances where people take it to a stretch, but generally, the idea (of grooming) is required. You have to abide by those certain

[19] Translation: "It is the army's special way of doing things and upholding military customs."

guiding principles without losing your individuality, which honestly is very difficult. Still, it is important for the officer and the spouse to be groomed so they know how they should conduct themselves in the institution.

In these various ways, Jyoti dismissed and negated military practices such as grooming as forms of gendered control exercised through military power. She imagined "parameters" of the military as institutional military "etiquettes" which she believed were not only necessary to uphold "military discipline or decorum" but also deemed them as means through which officers' wives of the Indian Army gained "respect", "a sense of aura", and "status".

…

Through the above illustrations of officers' wives' labour, I have shown how different women interpreted what it meant to be an army wife. Officers' wives such as Tanvi, Heena, Preeti, Jyoti, and Richa personified the archetype of the loyalist military wife, occupying positions on the B extreme of the military power (AB) axis.

The empirical narratives illuminate how military power was treated as both normative and natural, with gendered roles, divisions, and responsibilities understood as institutional "demands", "expectations", or "requirements". The micro-politics of military power and gendered tropes were defended in the name of military effectiveness, perceived as a matter of national security, upward career mobility, familial stability, and military decorum. While some officers' wives, such as Preeti and Jyoti, defended gendered divisions of labour on the grounds of military effectiveness and national security, others, like Tanvi, applied similar logic to justify the evaluation of gendered voluntary contributions. Heena, by contrast, supported such evaluation in the name of personal security and career mobility, while Richa and Tanvi continued to defend gendered control in the name of military effectiveness.

Women's lived experiences also shed light on how officers' wives, like Tanvi, imagined the military as a "benevolent benefactor" — one that offered personnel material and symbolic "privileges" such as social respect, a shared identity, job security, healthcare, economic subsidies, and recreational facilities (Enloe 2014). Others, including Heena, Preeti, and Jyoti, framed welfare events and coffee mornings as "integrative networks", mechanisms for fostering social cohesion or as opportunities for personal development (Segal 1986).

Some officers' wives, like Tanvi and Jyoti, saw the military not only as a provider of social security but also as a site of empowerment for soldiers' wives. They self-identified as welfare agents and framed their participation in welfare initiatives as opportunities to "make a difference", "empower" others, and promote "self-reliance". At the same time, they saw these initiatives as offering personal growth, fulfilment, and the cultivation of traits such as strength, bravery, and independence. Moreover, their narratives highlight how officers' wives imagined practices like grooming and the evaluation of voluntary contributions as "protocols" and "traditions" unique to the Indian Army. Tanvi and Jyoti, framed these practices as essential to military "discipline" and "legacy" and crucial for maintaining the "culturally refined", "dignified", and "graceful" image of the officer's wife in both military and social contexts. In particular, Tanvi's commentary helps understand how officers' wives employed the rhetoric of "changing times" to argue that the Indian Army had modernised, moving away from archaic practices and becoming more "lenient" and "less rigid". This framing was used to rationalise their participation in the military and persuade other military wives to invest in the institution.

Other women like Heena and Richa help illustrate how officers' wives voluntarily framed the military as a family, interpreting the hierarchy as a form of normative familial authority. They used the rhetoric of familial relations and belonging to support the micro-politics of military power and to encourage other women to conform to institutional expectations.

Finally, empirical reflections allude to how officer's wives, through their gendered labour and contributions, uphold and reproduce the same military, class, and education hierarchies they claim to be dismantling and breaking down by contributing their voluntary labour in welfare initiatives. In doing so, they are vocal and nonchalant in wielding their upper-middle class, educated family backgrounds, and their association with the officer cadre of the Indian Army and reinforce the idealised image of the officer's wife as "culturally refined", "dignified", and "graceful", in comparison to the "tradition-bound" soldiers' wives assumed to hold limited education and belonging to conservative households and marriages in need of support.

Loyalist officers' wives, through their socio-political labour, were in these ways at the forefront of producing favourable narratives about military power. Their lived experiences underscore the ways in which women married to men in state militaries not only reproduce but also take pride in actively attempting to embody the features of the "ideal" or "model" military wife construct (Enloe 2000; Spanner 2022).

Loyalist Officers' Wives' Agency

To some, it may seem that loyalist officers' wives' agency (choice), in many ways, remains tied to their military husbands, military power, and the apparatus. In sharp contrast, Tanvi, Heena, Preeti, Jyoti, and Richa did not perceive themselves as holding restricted agency. Nor did these officers' wives imagine the military apparatus and its associated gendered expectations and tropes as constraints exercised on them.

Irrespective of having married officers belonging to support or combat arms, officers' wives own their positions in the military apparatus. While some (like Tanvi, Jyoti, or Preeti) acknowledged the military as a male-dominated organisation, they also imagined the military as a space where women are "respected" and "revered". These officers' wives do not acknowledge their roles as secondary or subordinate. They derived "a sense of satisfaction" from and took pride in playing their supportive roles, "being there" for their husbands or "ensuring" their (husbands) "peace of mind", providing a "stress-free environment", and supporting military protocol in the name of military discipline and respect. They believed their ability to be supportive and provide "a happy home" made it "possible" for the military officers to "focus" on their job and "give 100% to the organisation", which they simultaneously deemed to be a matter of military effectiveness and national security. They celebrated the "critical role" they played in the military apparatus as welfare agents in providing "opportunities" of empowerment to soldiers' wives and insinuated it was their contributions to the apparatus that made it possible for their husbands to have a successful military career.

While some officers' wives refrained from articulating their sense of liberation explicitly and others conveyed it with conviction and assertiveness, what is particularly noteworthy is that across the spectrum, all perceived their distinct relationship with the micro-politics of military power as "choices" they made, "attitudes" they embraced, or "mindsets" they adopted.

Preeti identified as a homemaker and shared that she "liked to meet people who have a different thought process" as she gets "to learn from them." She left her self-assessment of liberation at that and did not comment on how liberated (modern or progressive) she felt in comparison to women her age.

Tanvi self-identified once again as being unlike other officers' wives. This time, she made this distinction concerning paid labour. Tanvi compared herself to other officers' wives, whom she referred to as the "average" army wife or the "memsahib"[20]. She underlined how *she* took part in paid labour

[20] A context-specific phrase used in Indian culture to refer to women elder in age.

to distinguish herself from the average wife and impressed upon the "satisfaction and fulfilment" she received from teaching and from "balancing" military responsibility with her paid "job". She then utilised military challenges such as "years of separation" as frameworks to assert her choice concerning military power and to differentiate herself from "spoilt" combat wives. Tanvi compared herself to other combat officers' wives, whom she labelled "weak-minded" for their inability to go through "even one field posting". She shared how she "chose" to be "happy" despite the many years of separation from her combat-serving husband and described herself as a resilient individual. Tanvi also had a unique way of negating the military as a patriarchal space by challenging the very masculinity of the military. Tanvi believed the "army was full of soft men". In efforts to affirm her assertion, she made a distinction between "army men" whom she believed were "very soft-hearted" and "turn turtle to make women happy and care too much about women" and "civil guys" who she deemed to be "more dominating".

Heena believed she was "liberated" in comparison to friends her age. She shared how she did not "care about log kya kehenge"[21] and asserted how she "never followed the mob, did things differently, and always stood out". Heena had "chosen" not to participate in paid labour and "prioritised" her military and familial responsibilities. Heena's response to the following questions provides deeper insight into how officers' wives used self-descriptions and the language of choice to distance themselves from other women and as frameworks to engage with military practices. In reproducing the "elite" positioning associated with the army officer's wife in the broader social and military order, Heena used this status to rationalise her choices, such as "never cribbing" about military expectations and "being ambitious:"

> *T: What is your take on the Indian Army?*
>
> *Heena: It's a family which gives you strong values. I am very proud of being in this set up. I feel protected and honoured. I feel I am elite in a way because of the army. It makes me different from the rest of the society. I was very ambitious in the army. I never cribbed because I wanted to keep moving upward, and that mindset really helped me.*

Like Tanvi, Richa also held a B.Ed. degree and began working once her children were of age, often in the same school they attended. Richa wielded her educational qualifications to differentiate herself from what she described as "housewives of the army" and emphasised the difficulty she experienced

[21] Translation: "what people will say".

in “doing nothing all day”. She expressed dissatisfaction with the daily or weekly routines, such as coffee mornings and household care, that many housewives participated in and stressed the importance of doing something productive with her time. In another part of the conversation, she shared that her husband had asked her to give up paid labour for a “particular” military posting. However, she made a point to frame her decision to “quit” her job and “prioritise” military responsibilities over her career as a conscious “choice” she had made.

Moreover, she did not perceive losing financial independence as a form of loss incurred. Instead, Richa imagined the military as a space that gave her an “identity”, “respect”, and “status”. She pridefully asserted, “A lot of what I am today is by virtue of the Indian Army.”

Richa believed she was “definitely, (and) without a doubt” “liberated in comparison to women’s and friends (her) age”. She described herself as “fiercely independent”. She supported this assertion by declaring that she “goes out, shops, and watches movies alone”. She also believed she was unlike other women her age, whom she perceived as living a “domesticated” and “cloistered life”.

Liminal Officers' Wives

Toads in a well

Noor was also extremely welcoming and warm. She was among those officers' wives who allowed me to distinguish between an interview and a long, natural conversation, as she spoke "freely" and "frankly". Noor was among those few women who asked me to call them by their first name even though she was much older than me. Noor had been married to an officer of the combat arms for almost two decades, worked as a teacher, and, at the time of the interview, had worked in the same school for a "few years".

Noor compared military wives to "toads in a well". She believed the role of an army officer's wife to be "minimal" and shared:

> *T: What do you think is the role of an army officer's wife?*
>
> *Noor: We like to glorify the role that we play. We like to claim that we are moving along with the men or that we are equal participants in the decision-making process, but the truth of the matter is that you are subsumed in the larger role that your husband is playing, and ultimately you have to make peace with the fact that it is all going to be about him and his life. Your life is just a subset of his life, and that is how it is.*

Noor challenged the supportive role of the military wife by associating it with submission and equating the role to "toeing the line". She was critical of the gendered military responsibility associated with welfare. Noor labelled AWWA as a "superfluous organisation" and called out the class and military hierarchy associated with welfare. She was critical of senior officers' wives who took the "onus on themselves to be the caretakers or caregivers" for soldiers' wives. She projected her moral superiority and class consciousness by citing examples of the distinctions made between officers' wives and soldiers' wives in seating and catering arrangements, asserting:

> *T: What is your take on AWWA and Ladies' Meet?*
>
> *Noor: I think we have made a humongous deal over something which could have been kept at a very basic level of probably just meeting and greeting. But we have built it into a very competitive and intrusive process. I feel these events promote a memsahib culture, which I don't agree with. You have ladies waiting for hours for the senior lady to arrive in the heat. They get different food and different types of chairs.*

Noor did not end her assessment there. After critiquing the class and education hierarchies associated with welfare initiatives, she reflected on how she believed the Army had become "less archaic" in contemporary times. She then utilised this logic — the "military is changing/has changed" narrative —and the idea of social security to support gendered events to an extent. In doing so, she reproduced officers' wives assumed 'cultural' superiority in marital relations. Her self-assessed contradictory response was insightful, demonstrating how officers' wives can paradoxically support military power in micro-spaces (and the associated class-education hierarchies) while simultaneously challenging military power and the same hierarchies in those same spaces. Noor continued:

> *Noor: Having said that, I think (welfare) also tries to serve as a bridge between the officers and the soldiers. There are a lot of times they (soldiers' wives) have problems which they can't sort out at 'their' level, so we get a peek into their personal lives to help them. We take some kind of preventive measures so that we can safeguard them. Also, there has been a shift and change in mindset. It is not as archaic as it used to be; people have become more sensitive to others' time and space.*

In addition to defending the "importance" of gendered interaction in the name of women's security, to help soldier's wives having "familial crisis or (marital) problems". Noor occupied the liminal space on the military power axis as she simultaneously supported and critiqued military practices such as grooming.

In response to the question of the "role of an army officer's wife", Noor shared:

> *Noor: There is a set of unwritten norms and codes, which, irrespective of what you feel or think, you have to go along with and abide by as they are going to be the means to buy your peace. You can have an identity crisis because there is no real role of an army officer's wife.*

Noor also shared her critical stance towards the practice of grooming:

> *T: What is your take on the practice of grooming in the army?*
>
> *Noor: I was not groomed per se. I am extremely averse to the idea of anyone telling anyone what to do. Grooming and training sort of attack the basic element of a person. You don't have to be trained for anything. Everyone has that basic*

decorum. Unless someone is totally out of the woods, I don't think this grooming word should be used.

After a few minutes of Noor having made this strong assertion, I asked Noor what she thought or how she perceived the gendered control wielded on officers' wives through the military hierarchy. Noor's self-assessed, contradictory response was perceptive:

Noor: It does happen. At some point, such intervention (by the senior hierarchy or the military husband) becomes necessary. I may be contradicting myself when I say this, but wives don't understand the importance of courtesy. It is important to respect the sanctity of the institution because the army is very patriarchal. We come from a very sexually deprived audience, with them (the men) staying away (from their wives).

So, it is like providing fodder for the men and their thoughts, which could probably trigger unwanted incidents. In that light, advisories are important to sensitise the women to the fact that the army is a male-dominated system and that there will be somebody from the village who will be in the MES[22] who is trying to keep his carnal instincts in check. These rules and regulations are just a simple case of keeping yourself safe and conducting yourself with dignity.

Noor elaborated upon a popular sentiment shared amongst officers' wives. She helped understand how many women treated the sexual instincts of men as normative and natural. Noor also provided insights into how officers' wives supported the soldiers' masculinity and how women negated and dismissed the rank and class hierarchy associated with the soldier and the officer's wife. Many women, like Noor, stressed the necessity for women to understand the soldier's socio-economic family background. They urged women to ensure that the military soldier or family man is not "tempted" in any way. At the same time, they support gendered control through rules and regulations in the name of women's "safety" and military "decorum".

The problem is execution

Deepti also occupied liminal spaces on the military power axis. On the one hand, Deepti was critical of gendered events such as welfare and Ladies' Meets and questioned the "execution" of these events.

[22] Official military spaces

On the other hand, Deepti supported the necessity of gendered events while also supporting military practices such as grooming in the name of women's "safety and comfort".

She first challenged the execution of welfare and how it was conducted without negating the necessity of welfare, gendered events, and gendered investment of labour:

> *T: What is your take on the AWWA?*
>
> *Deepti: See, if you look at AWWA from a big picture, there is a lot that AWWA is doing for the war widows or in terms of opening hostels for soldiers' children. While the principle behind AWWA is important, somewhere, we have gone wrong in executing the aim or goal of AWWA. Otherwise, it is not a bad idea to begin with.*
>
> *Soldiers' wives are required to come and wait for hours. In this way, the AWWA need to evolve. In reality, we should provide ladies with the help they need, such as healthcare or tuition for their children.*

While critical of how class hierarchy shaped how soldiers' wives' time and presence were valued, Deepti simultaneously upheld the same hierarchy by stressing the need to "evolve" welfare initiatives. She utilised the changing times framework and urged the need for the military to consider the new generation of working women coming into the army and their demands concerning military practices:

> *Deepti: We (the army) need to move with the times and realise that the younger generation coming into the army now are working women. We can't expect these ladies to get involved with the running of AWWA shops or pickle-making. We need to evolve and completely do away from this draamabazi*[23]*.*

While emphasising the need for the army to change, Deepti cited examples of some stations where the senior hierarchy had introduced "SOPs", detailing that no unnecessary preparations or performances would be required to be organised on behalf of the officers' wives for such events. She compared these stations to other stations where she felt senior hierarchy still resisted bringing in change in the functioning of gendered events:

> *T: What is your take on the AWWA?*
>
> *Deepti: There are some people who don't want to change. There are so many SOPs that are taken out that there shouldn't be dance and drama at events or practice*

[23] Translation: Events that are considered to be exaggerated and over-the-top.

for more than five days, but still, in other stations, ladies are expected to do a fashion show, sing or perform. There is no real true interaction that happens between the ladies either in the Ladies' Meet or at welfare meets.

Deepti then utilised military responsibility as a framework to assert how she chose to engage with military expectations "differently". Deepti corroborated how the ability to act as a welfare agent was shaped by military hierarchy, including the "rank of the military husband". She believed she was unlike other officers' wives who did not "torture" or "force" *ladies* to practice for months to welcome a new senior lady. Sharing how "such concepts never made sense to" her, she asserted:

Deepti: Whenever my chance to organise, such events has come, I have not allowed such things. We do tiny skits for educational purposes to teach the ladies social lessons rather than harp on themes like Sawwan[24] and Pink Lady.

In these ways, Deepti evidences how officers' wives utilised military expectations and "changing times" as frameworks for self-identification and to differentiate themselves from other officers' wives, whom they deemed unwilling to move with the times.

Deepti challenged gendered events for implementation and execution. She simultaneously deemed these events as "important" and supported them in the name of social security and military bonhomie:

T: What is your take on other events such as Ladies' Meet? What do you make of these events?

Deepti: These events are important to ensure the fabric of the army and the bonding in the army, but the ways in which this happens need to change.

Moreover, Deepti was less ambiguous in expressing her support for military grooming practices. She first identified as being "very obedient" in the army and shared how she "never tried to do anything that was not supposed to be done" during her years in the military. She then defended her support for grooming as it imagined them as mechanisms to ensure women's "safety". Deepti believed it was her "job" and "responsibility" to groom young girls to ensure they are "safe and comfortable":

T: What is your take on the practice of grooming in the army?

Deepti: When my chance to groom came, I didn't tell them how they should dress per se but gave them guidelines on how to dress. It was my responsibility to teach

[24] Translation: "Monsoon".

> *the young girls, especially those from a civilian background, how things work in the army, how to behave in the army, what to say, who to say it to and how to say it… to make sure the girls are safe and comfortable and ensure that the channels of communication remain open.*

The above empirical narrative highlight how some officers' wives of the Indian Army personify the archetype of the liminal military wife and, in doing so, occupy liminal spaces on the military power (AB) axis.

While women invoked the logic of "changing times" to challenge welfare and emphasised the need to "change" or "evolve" the manner in which military events were conducted and how their "objectives" were "implemented", advocating for greater recognition of the increasing social and educational mobility of soldiers' wives as a distinct social group. At the same time, they employed the language of "well-being" and social security to justify support for welfare initiatives to an extent. In doing so, these women simultaneously upheld and contested class, educational, and military hierarchies within institutional spaces, as well as the "culturally refined" positioning of officers' wives within the broader military and social order. Noor, in particular, helps us understand how officers' wives utilise self-descriptions, such as their capacity to "move with the times" or draw on military seniority, as frameworks to distinguish themselves from "other" women. These gendered insights further shed light on how practices such as grooming were, for some officers' wives (like Noor), simultaneously recognised as forms of control and restraint and paradoxically supported in the name of women's "safety" and military "decorum".

Liminal Officers' Wives' Agency

In sharp contrast to loyalist officers' wives, Noor and Deepti acknowledged the military as a patriarchal and male-dominated space. They recognised the role of the military wife as subordinate to that of the officer and described various aspects of army life as constraining. Noor and Deepti were vocal in declaring the lack of or limited choice they had, not in a complete or absolute sense, but in relation to their capacity to navigate everyday military constraints. These limitations included restricted mobility due to frequent transfers, frustration over limited career options, the need to prioritise family responsibilities, and an inability to openly challenge military norms for fear of negatively affecting their husbands' careers. Yet, even while articulating these constraints, both women believed they still had some degree of choice, particularly in a broader, more philosophical sense.

Noor had completed a five-year law degree before choosing to marry her boyfriend at the time — now her husband, an officer. She was unable to practise as a lawyer, having found it difficult to convince firms to hire her on a contractual basis. As an alternative, she decided to pursue a B.Ed. and work as a teacher. She later drew on these qualifications to underscore her positioning as a 'mentor' for soldiers' wives and to differentiate herself from other officers' wives in the Indian Army — particularly those who, as she noted, had never worked.

While Noor accepted and called out the military as a patriarchal organisation, her response helped understand how officers' wives consciously and critically interpreted the degree to which they believed the military shaped their lives. It also evidences the complicated sense of belonging officers' wives share towards the military apparatus:

> *T: What is your take on the Indian Army and your experience?*
>
> *Noor: It has been full of ups and downs, especially for someone like me who is extremely individualistic in nature. I have found the army to be stifling in more ways than one. I say this without any rancour or bitterness, but there is no room for individual freedom in the army. I might appear to be bitter, but I am no longer that bitter. There was a time I used to be.*

I asked Noor if she believed there was a possibility of women resisting military practices of the army. Noor's response was insightful. She identified as "an extremely rebellious and anti-establishment person" and described the ways in which she chose to modify how she expressed her critique:

> *Noor: To an extent, I still am. It is just that I have become smart enough not to be vocal about it. I found ways of the army very bizarre and constraining, but slowly,*

what happens is you just get used to it. As an example, the dress codes are things you learn over time. The army is a different world altogether, and these are certain norms we have to go by.

She then emphasised that "any form of resistance dies its slow natural death over time" in the army. She rationalised her stance by explaining how her resistance to the system resulted in her "becoming the system":

T: What is your take on the scope of resistance?

Noor: I was telling somebody this: in the earlier years, we used to fight the system, and then at one point, you realise you have become the system. That is how it has been in my case. I used to, at one point, feel things were absurd in the army, and now it is like I am the system. I am the one now who is telling people how to do things.

Noor's response to the following question underscores how ideas about class, education, and family background shape officers' wives' relative understandings of liberation and choice. Her narrative is also crucial for understanding how the notion of choice is interpreted in relative and subjective ways by officers' wives. She acknowledges that the choices she makes are shaped by familial and marital limitations, but does not believe that this negates her capacity for choice in a more philosophical or metaphorical sense. In doing so, she not only re-emphasised her relative sense of feeling 'liberated' but also differentiated herself from other women — those she perceived as more tightly bound by family expectations. She made clear that her choices are deliberate, taken over other alternatives, and based on her own self-assessment of her capabilities:

T: Do you see yourself as liberated in comparison to women and friends your age?

Noor: I think I am very liberated. I think I can just get up and say this is not what I like, and this is not how I would like it to be. I can make my own choices. I may be constricted within the space of my own limitations. But it is not because I feel that my familial situation will get affected or because my husband or in-laws are not going to like it that I do not do something. I do not ('choose' to challenge or resist) because I do not feel equipped enough to undertake something that goes beyond my abilities. So yes, I am definitely liberated.

Noor chose not to resist or challenge military practices because she did not believe she could act on her choices. The insistence that she had choice, despite recognising its limits, reveals how class, education, and family background shaped not only how some women understood their agency but also how they defined what it means to have — or to lack — agency. Noor also captures how officers' wives reproduce the micro-politics of military power while simultaneously constructing and halting feminist critique.

The complex sense of agency and belonging that officers' wives shared with military power was reinforced by Deepti.

Deepti had been a homemaker until her children began attending university. She explained that she had chosen to prioritise her children and their education, which she felt often "suffered" due to the frequent relocations required by military life. In another part of the conversation, she shared another reason for not participating in paid labour during her early years: she believed that a successful military career in the Indian Army required "wives to give it their all". In response to broader military expectations and requirements such as welfare and grooming, she shared:

> *Deepti: Many times, you end up doing things (investing labour or attending events) because you don't have a choice. Either you just become a rebel and keep protesting everything and face social ostracisation, and the husband ends up suffering, or you just participate happily.*

Deepti helps understand how officers' wives perceived themselves holding limited "choice" as they had to choose between complying or being seen as rebellious — between prioritising their self-interests and risking social isolation or the halted career mobility of their officer husbands. She also underscores how women consciously assess the potential costs of making a particular decision and, based on their self-assessments and calculations, make particular choices, and commit to the choices they make. Complying with military requirements were choices women made. Deepti chose to "participate" to ensure familial stability and economic security. She described herself as someone who, by adopting a "positive" outlook, "contributed" to the apparatus and emphasised the "goodwill" she believed she received from "doing things" (such as taking part in welfare) with "good intentions:

> *Deepti: One should see it as if one positively contributes to the organisation, and the goodwill is so much. You have to show that your intentions are good.*

Moreover, in response to the question of how officers' wives interpret their sense of liberation, Deepti was vocal in declaring that she was "absolutely" liberated and "a lot more modern" compared to other

women her age. She drew on the distinct and prestigious identity associated with the officer's wife construct in society to affirm her claim, imagining the military as a space where "ladies held a different image" and were "looked upon with great respect". To further underscore her sense of liberation, she endearingly shared that "if someone (she knew) had heard" her "answers" during the interview, "they would have been shocked". This self-assessment followed her critique of certain military practices and revealed how, for Deepti, the act of critique, voiced in private spaces, was itself an articulation of liberation. Deepti echoed the claim made earlier by Noor, reinforcing the idea that modernity and liberation are experienced in relative and mundane ways. She framed her ability to be critical of military practices within the private space of her home as evidence of a (partial) sense of liberation. She associated these critiques with a self-assigned "modern" outlook. Through such self-descriptions, Deepti differentiated herself from other officers' wives — those she believed lacked choice as they were unable to voice their concerns, thoughts, or desires.

Militant Officers' Wives

Isha had been married to an officer of the combat arms for seven years and described her journey in the army as a "roller coaster ride". She labelled officers' wives "second fiddles" and dismantled the practice of grooming by deeming the idea to be "just repulsive". While sharing, she said she "did not see any ladies in her unit having a problem" with this practice. Isha deemed it "crazy" that her husband was "supposed to groom" her, "teach" her "how to conduct" herself in "the presence of people", and teach her "how to eat, when to speak, how to greet people, and know when to stand".

Moreover, she recognised the gendered equation — the idea that "the wife plays an important role in getting the husbands the next rank" as "a fact" and "an open secret", and was as nonchalant in declaring the wife's "decisions, actions, and choices" were "tied to the progress" the military officer is "likely to make in the military".

Isha challenged gendered events and the associated class hierarchy, much like the liminal officers' wives. She referred to AWWA as a "white elephant" and stressed how the organisation had "outlived its purpose" in the present day. On her own accord, she suggested I "dig deeper into the classism that exists in the army… in terms of the rank and file and how class comes into the picture, especially when it comes to the women". She was critical of how the "officers' wives assumed they were 'intellectually superior' and 'culturally refined' to the soldiers' wives" and how often they wielded this assumption to "teach" soldiers' wives mannerisms, etiquettes, or behaviours:

> *"I have personally witnessed (how) soldiers' wives who were reluctant to participate in welfare activities were threatened with dire consequences like extending the man's duty hours, threatening them with eviction from their quarters and so on. The purpose behind AWWA was to keep soldiers' wives entertained. Not so much now, we have the internet, we have so much exposure now."*

Moreover, Isha levied the same criticism against gendered events, such as Ladies' Meets, and stressed the futility of gendered practices and the entertainment role these functions were intended to serve. She was critical of the mandatory attendance required for welfare and social events. She highlighted how rank and military hierarchy were often wielded by senior officers' wives to pressure younger officers' wives — referred to as "young girls" — into investing their voluntary labour in the apparatus. This included performing skits, preparing dance routines, singing, or showcasing their cooking talents. Similar to loyalist officers' wives, Isha also drew a familial comparison but did so in a less favourable light. She compared gendered events to "family weddings", using this analogy to emphasise how "preparations" for such events "began months in advance" and involved "countless" rehearsals.

Isha drew on her own experience in the military to rationalise her stance. She narrated how, during a particular posting while working remotely as a consultant, she was "explicitly told" by senior personnel "not to take up any freelance assignments" because she was "expected" to serve as the MC for an upcoming welfare event:

> *"She (the senior officer's wife) was not ready to take no for an answer. I was inundated with calls and messages. My husband was being pressured by the CO... Ultimately, my husband had to intervene and let the CO know that I would not be doing it. After that, I was completely ostracised. I stayed in my house and didn't come out for 15 days."*

Isha's experience highlights how officers' wives themselves can wield power and use coercive measures to "convince" other women to invest their voluntary labour in the apparatus. Her narrative also reveals how the threat of social ostracisation functions as a powerful and effective mechanism deployed by officers' wives within the Army to encourage the unpaid, gendered investment of labour.

Like Jyoti, militant officers' wives also presented the army as a "different world altogether for the spouse". Isha did so to assert how "overwhelming and baffling" the military experience had been for her as a "free-thinking, well-travelled woman". She emphasised the need for the Army to "move" and "change with time" and shared the "identity" crisis she experienced during her first few weeks.

> *T: What is your take on the Indian Army and your experience?*
>
> *Isha: The Indian Army hasn't seemed to have kept pace with the times in terms of treating spouses as individuals in their own right. Once you have married an army officer, it is assumed that you have married the entire institution. You are faced with this peculiar dilemma, a struggle to keep your identity and individuality intact. Nobody calls me by my name these days. It is always Mrs ___, and I haven't changed my last name. There was something just insane about this world in the army. The times are changing, but the army is stuck in this time warp in the name of respecting the women and treating them like princesses and queens.*

Escaping the military

Isha shared how the "struggle" to keep her identity intact was so "crushing" that it "took a huge toll on her mental health". In response, Isha chose to "quit" the military apparatus:

Isha: My resistance is me quitting the WhatsApp group of the army ladies where information is shared on which events we have to attend and where the practices are happening. I don't know anything that is going around. At some point, I was being judged for it, and now I have reached a point where I really don't care, which is a great feeling. I am somebody who does not get into conflict with anybody. I am kind of an escapist, and I am doing exactly that… escaping.

Isha identified as "an introvert" and "a very private person" and believed she was "very unconventional" in comparison to women around her:

T: Do you see yourself as liberated in comparison to women and friends your age?

Isha: My upbringing was such that I was never silenced. I was free to do anything and everything. My personality and my way of doing things don't sit well with many people in the army, of course.

Once again, Isha's assertion highlights how officers' wives experience liberation in a comparative sense, closely tied to their ability to voice their thoughts. For some officers' wives, like Deepti, the very act of constructing and articulating feminist critique — albeit in closed, private spaces — was understood as an expression of both choice and liberation. For others, like Isha, constructing feminist critique, acting upon it, and "escaping" the gendered apparatus altogether became the basis for experiencing and asserting their sense of liberation.

Isha concluded her "take on the Indian Army" with the following assessment:

Isha: "You are very conveniently thrust into this role of what they proudly call the 'silent army' — and quite frankly, that army of women, complete with their indomitable tolerance built over the years in their efforts to hold some ridiculously regressive traditions is too silent for its own good."

Isha not only evidences how feminist critique is constructed and produced by women situated within institutions of hegemonic masculinity but also supports this study's hypothesis: that gendered labour and the power officers' wives wield play a critical role in halting feminist critique constructed within the organisation by women themselves. Clear parallels emerge between how liminal officers' wives, such as Noor, Deepti, and Isha, interpreted and critiqued military practices. Like Noor and Deepti, Isha acknowledged the military as a patriarchal and male-dominated space. They recognised the role of the military wife as subordinate to that of the officer and described military life as constraining in

various ways. Isha, too, faced the same choice as other liminal officers' wives: to either comply with or rebel against military expectations and constraints. Isha chose to rebel. She refused to invest her labour in the apparatus and actively distanced herself from military personnel. In doing so, Isha experienced social ostracisation, thereby affirming Deepti's fear that rebellion would come at the cost of social exclusion. Her experience also revealed how feminist critique and resistance are often silenced or halted by a "silent army of women" who uphold the micro-practices of militarisation in both relative and absolute ways. Finally, Isha reinforces how officers' wives wielded choice and rationales of changing times, increased exposure, and educated family backgrounds as means of self-identification and differentiation from "other" officers' wives.

….

To conclude, the chapter has highlighted the complex ways in which officers' wives of the Indian Army engage with the micro-politics of military power and illustrated how choice constituted an expression of gendered agency. Officer's wives of the Indian Army choose to uphold, reproduce, or critique the workings of military power and wield their agency (along with other identity markers and contexts) to self-identify and differentiate themselves from other women in the larger social and military order.

The next chapter presents a gendered analysis of patriarchal power and explores how officers' wives engage with patriarchal power in its various forms in public and private arenas.

Chapter Six: The Officer's Wife and Patriarchal Power

The chapter introduces new participants as officers' wives. It explores how they engage with patriarchal power as a distinctive form of power, which is part of the gendered military apparatus and the larger social order. Gendered narrations and reflections depict how different officers' wives, through the rationales of "security", "pragmatism", "self-identifications", familial framings, and changing times, engage with and interpret the workings of patriarchal power in complex, overlapping, and contradictory ways.

The objective of making a gendered analysis of patriarchal power is to highlight three things. First is the distinct and respective interpretation of different socio-cultural ideologies and beliefs were officer wives' expressions of choice (agency). Second, the chapter pays attention to women's self-descriptions and how they use these to differentiate themselves from "other" women (those in the military and larger Indian society). Third, this chapter highlights how officers' wives, through their socio-political labour, uphold and critique the durability and ubiquity of different socio-cultural norms and ideologies in public and private spaces.

The Patriarchal Power Axis

Figure 4. The Patriarchal Power Axis

Like the military power axis, the patriarchal power (CD) axis (figure 3) will help acknowledge and map the diversity of gendered labour concerning patriarchal power. Officers' wives associated themselves firmly with either extreme of the CD axis by challenging (C) or supporting (D) patriarchal power in public and private spaces.

Alternatively, officers' wives move on the axis, as they simultaneously challenge and support patriarchal power and its gendered tropes in different public or private arenas.

Conservative Officers' Wives

It is about physical strength

Meena, with pride, shared how, in her house, her husband was "the man of the house" and the "right person to make all the major decisions". She rationalised her assertion by citing essentialist gendered assumptions:

> *T: Do you adhere to the notion of there being a man of the house?*
>
> *Meena: Simply put, yes, I feel in my house, my husband is the man of the house. The man is called the man of the house because of the physical strength the man possesses. He might not be as mentally strong, but it is the physical strength which always puts the man on top.*

Meena not only imagined "strength" as a "natural" masculine quality or trait. She utilised the logic of tradition, proximity to the public arena, and financial capacity to rationalise gendered hierarchies and relations within her home:

> *Meena: For us, the man of the house is the earning member or someone who has made a name for the family. It can be anyone, but in my house, it is still the man because tradition has come along.*

Meena was much older than many of the other interviewees. She identified herself as representing the "older generations of officers' wives". Meena did so as she found the questions about the division of labour or familial hierarchies within the home themes very "fascinating". She often smirked in response to my questions and labelled questions on the "division of domestic duties" or those associated with bodily autonomy, such as pre-marital sex and live-in relations, as "new generation ideas".

Meena shared that there was "no division" of domestic duties or responsibility within her home. She cared for the kids, the home, and the family "entirely alone". She negated the "zero" division of domestic or familial responsibility between her and her husband as an expression of power. She masked it as an outcome of generational change, the idea that dividing domestic and familial responsibilities was a new age concept.

In another part of the conversation, Meena narrated two incidents, one involving her family relative and another involving their close friend and their kids, to stress how common the practice of living in had become amongst the present generation of youngsters:

T: What is your take on notions such as live-in relationships and pre-marital sex?

Meena: This is a very good question because it has become so common. When our relatives and people close to us are talking about it so openly, it broadens your mind also, but then again, these days, you hear of so many divorces — why is that happening? It is because of all this.

She accepted that open discussions about "live-in relationships" have helped her "broaden" her mindset. She also rejected these changes and deemed such concepts threatening the institution of marriage and family.

Meena shared intimate stories of her life with me. She explained how she "didn't take up a teaching job" until her children were old enough to attend school and, like many other officers' wives, worked in the same school as her children for the sake of "ease". She told me that she had "never worn jeans in (her) life" and described how, for more than two decades, she had "lived according to societal norms", those set by her "husband and her in-laws". She spoke of spending all her time "meeting the expectations of being a daughter-in-law, a mother, a wife". Meena did not consider herself to be subjected to patriarchal control, a perspective that becomes evident through her following assertion:

T: Do you see yourself as liberated in comparison to women and friends your age?

Meena: "My husband is very open-minded. He has let me be the way I wanted to be; he has curbed me at times because I am very vocal, but otherwise, he has let me be… I have my freedom. I can speak to my husband about anything I want. I can criticise, but I am rational.

Meena's assertion not only underscores the connection between liberation and the capacity to critique and voice that critique. Her attribution of experiencing liberation because of the open-mindedness of her husband also underscores how patriarchy is interpreted and how liberation is experienced in relative and subjective ways in comparison to an "imagined" community of women "out there" who are deemed belonging to "controlling marriages" where they "can't open their mouths" or "leave their homes without their husband's permission". Gendered control on bodily autonomy, gendered division of labour, gendered hierarchies, and gendered financial autonomy were all placed outside the ambit of patriarchal control. Women's restricted ability to critique, have an open conversation with husbands, and restricted mobility that required masculine acceptance were identified and defined as patriarchal practices.

We are both 'bosses'

Divya supported and challenged gendered relations and hierarchies within the home and the family, the public-private divide, and the gendered participation associated with the divide. She adhered to the notion of the man of the house proudly and wielded the logic of financial proximity to uphold gendered relations within the home:

> *T: Do you adhere to the notion of there being a man of the house?*
>
> *Divya: For me, yes. He is the primary earning member of the family, so he is the man of the house, and what is wrong with that?*

Divya simultaneously identified as the "boss" of the family. In reproducing gendered authority, her insights helped understand how, while officers' wives claimed their position and status as decision-makers of the house and asserted the decision-making power they held, their authority was gendered as being the boss entailed being the boss of gendered domains such as the home and the family. In response to the previous question, Divya continued:

> *Divya: If there is a man of the house, there is also a woman of the house. Only the departments are different. I always consult him before I make a decision. If even once he says he doesn't agree with my decision or asks me to do things differently, I listen to him because I don't trust myself any longer.*

In these ways, she supported gendered hierarchies and relations indirectly, as Divya ultimately "chose" to bestow "real" or the "final" decision-making power in the hands of her husband.

A matter of priorities …

Divya helped understand how women engaged with patriarchal power through the lens of paid labour.

Divya worked as a teacher "on and off" over the years in the army and civil schools "wherever and whenever" she got a "chance". She "started working" as a teacher after her daughter went to school and worked in the same school her daughter attended. She explained how both the nature of her profession and the location of her profession made it "very easy" for her to "balance work and family as the timings matched (her) schedule". Divya shared how she had been working for more than a decade until "one particular day" her husband asked her to "quit" her job:

T: How do you balance work and family life?

Divya: Given my job, it was very easy to balance work and family. I worked for many years, but finally, a day came when my husband asked me to quit my job because that particular day, my husband didn't get lunch. The maid had failed to tell me she was not coming. He told me, 'What is the point of working if the house is not being taken care of?'

Divya endearingly shared how she "did not want to quit" and added:

Divya: I asked him, 'What about the money I bring in?' He told me that I only bring the ice cream, and he brings in the bread and butter. And we can live without the ice cream. And he was very right. The day I quit, things fell into place.

She did not perceive her husband asking her to "quit" her job as an expression of gendered control exercised on her. On the contrary, she celebrated her "maturity" and her "ability to adapt to changing circumstances" while deeming women's "primary" responsibility towards motherhood as something inevitable. In other words, *choosing* family over money was a choice Divya made because she deemed it fit:

Divya: Most of the time, it is not easy for a woman to step out to work, especially if she has her priorities right. I could have neglected my house, gone to work, and brought in money, but I felt the family was more important. It all depends on how one adapts. I want my daughter to be a career-oriented woman, but come motherhood, she might have to quit for a few years, which she will eventually do, and that is okay.

She continued:

Divya: For a woman to be a working woman, it is ten times more difficult than a man because she has to undergo motherhood… marriage… she has more responsibilities. A woman who is able to work and manage everything, I consider her a goddess because it is not easy. You will see it for yourself.

All thanks to the Army

Divya shared how she was "100% responsible for the household" and how there was "no changing of diapers, no getting up late at night" by the father. Divya attributed gendered divisions as an outcome of military power, the military profession, and the officer "not being around that much". In doing so, she masked gendered divisions as institutional outcomes and patriarchal power as forms of military power. She then supported gendered divisions in the name of military effectiveness and familial security.

Other officers' wives elaborated on why they were apprehensive of gendered bodily autonomy. Divya affirmed her dislike and aversion to such ideas without detailing her reasoning. She was nonchalant in declaring how she supported the practice of abortion "only for medical reasons". She noted how she "hated" *both* concepts of live-in relationship and the idea of pre-marital sex, concluding them to be a "total no-no".

What patriarchy?

Divya was amongst those women who engaged with the concept of patriarchy.

Divya conceded her "career took a backseat" as she "got very involved with the home and the family". In response to how she engaged with or interpreted patriarchy, Divya shared:

> *T: What is your take on patriarchy?*
>
> *Divya: [Taking some time to answer] You know I have never experienced patriarchy or anything of its liking. So, I won't be able to comment on how I challenge it. In my house, I got spoilt by my father. We were given a lot of liberties, considering the time.*
>
> *At that time in the 90s, no decision was imposed upon us, apart from when my father decided to get me married because he felt my husband was the right guy for me and because he thought it was the right time.*

Divya reflections evidence, once again, how patriarchy was interpreted in relative and subjective ways by officers' wives. Divya placed practices such as the gendered division of labour, hierarchical family structures, relinquishing financial autonomy, restrictions on bodily autonomy, and arranged marriages outside the scope of patriarchal control. Their understanding of patriarchy and what constituted its presence or absence was shaped by class hierarchies, levels of education, and family backgrounds.

Not only did Divya share how "indebted" she was to her father for his choice and decision to get her married to the "right guy". She asserted how she had "a very supportive husband". After dismissing the prevalence of the gender order in her own natal home. Divya, continuing to present her assessment of patriarchy, added:

> *Divya: I don't think patriarchy exists in families like ours. Our girls won't take it.*

Divya indirectly tied class hierarchy, education, and family backgrounds with the gender order and its prevalence in society. She believed that patriarchal control was "non-existent" in "progressive" and "educated" households such as her own. She assessed it as a practice "common in lower economic strata of society where families had limited access to education". She shared the advice she gave her daughter on marriage to defend and support her claim that the gender order was non-existent in her home. The irony in her contradiction was noteworthy.

Divya put forward her progressive stance by expressing her support for her daughter, challenging the institution of marriage. However, she also self-assessed the values she was passing on to her daughter, as she, in the same instance, shared her fear while also assuring herself of her daughter's maturity:

> *Divya: That is what I taught my daughter. You will have to be prepared to give a lot to a relationship, but the day it infringes upon your self-esteem and pride, you will not take it any further. We told her that she could come back home after marriage whenever she wanted to. Sometimes I thought to myself, what am I teaching her because she might walk back home at the slightest inconvenience, but then she is a very mature person.*

Divya believed she had "lived a very fulfilled" and "wholesome life". While her "own personal aspirations and dreams" had "taken a backseat", this was "something" Divya was "okay with". She believed she had become "authoritative" and "bossy with age". She self-identified as being "very liberated and open-minded" in comparison to women and friends her age, but also shared how she did not have the opportunity to "prove" her liberated stance:

> *T: Do you see yourself as liberated in comparison to women and friends your age?*
>
> *Divya: VERY, of course. I am very liberated and very open-minded, but life hasn't posed many challenges to me where I could show how liberated I was, you know? But I know for a fact that if I had not gotten a supportive husband, I would have definitely taken a rebellious stand and would not have taken it lying down.*

Divya's attribution of experiencing liberation to a supportive husband reinforces other officers' wives (such as Meena's) claim. It affirms how liberation was experienced in relative and subjective ways in comparison to an "imagined" community of women "out there" who were assumed to be subjects of patriarchal restrictions at the hands of unsupportive husbands. It also helps affirm the idea that officers' wives believe they hold the capacity to control their decisions as they make choices based on their self-assessments. Divya believed she held choice and was "very liberated" as she would have "definitely rebelled" if she had been in a "controlling" marriage.

It is only natural

Sneha first ascribed concepts such as live-in relationships and pre-marital sex to "the West", in particular to "America". She then invoked essentialist perspectives to rationalise her scepticism towards what she labelled "Western concepts":

> *T: What is your take on live-in relationships and pre-marital sex?*
>
> *Sneha: I am not judging anybody, but I feel a man can still get over things and a woman cannot. It is not like I am being biased here. Still, because a woman is more emotional (being free with one's sleeping habits), it is going to have a huge psychological impact on a woman when she enters a marriage with that kind of baggage. A man, because he is the way he is, a man can handle it better.*

Sneha accepted women as "naturally" or "biologically" emotional and vulnerable, in relative comparison to men, and utilised this gendered logic to defend gendered control on bodily autonomy.

Sneha had "never actually thought about getting married or having children". She shared a secret — how "both times" her "getting pregnant were accidents". She deemed the practice of "abortion" acceptable "only for medical reasons" and believed "one should try not to make a mistake" as it involved "killing a soul".

Patriarchy gives structure

Sneha self-identified as a "pragmatic" and "well-read" person and then used this description to rationalise her support for the patriarchal gender order:

> *T: What is your take on patriarchy?*

Sneha: I have read a lot. I have realised why patriarchy is important. Humans require some kind of structure. You cannot make your own rules. Patriarchy is important so that everybody knows their particular place in the community and in the family. It helps in dictating what is expected out of people because of the virtue of the place you take in the system. Patriarchy protects everybody.

In these myriad ways, Sneha consciously chose to uphold and reproduce public and private arenas as gendered domains, the sexual division of labour within the home, and patriarchy's necessity.

In another part of the conversation, while she had attributed men to "doing the strong work" and women to "taking care of the kids", Sneha wielded her experience as a working woman to rationalise her stance on the existing masculine privileging social order. She explained how she worked in the "business industry" with her husband and critiqued the unsafe nature of the workplace to defend the necessity of "needing" her husband "beside" her in her workplace. In accepting men as protectors and treating the masculinist protectionist logic in the public arena as a normative feature of real life, Sneha not only consciously and actively reproduced the public-private dichotomy and essentialist assumptions. She simultaneously treated masculine authority as a normative and accepted reality:

T: How did you balance work and family life?

Sneha: It is easy as I work for myself. Because I am in such a male-dominated industry, I cannot work alone. I need a man beside me because these men don't take a woman seriously. They started referring to me as Bhabhi[25].

Sneha was more ardent and vocal in her support for the gender order than Meena and Divya. Simultaneously, Sneha challenged gendered hierarchies and claimed they were non-existent in her home and family. She reiterated the significance of having *both* a woman *and* a man in the house and emphasised their co-dependence:

T: Do you adhere to the notion of there being a man of the house?

Sneha: [After taking some time to answer] If the man of the house does not listen or give due importance to the woman of the house, he cannot function or expect a successful family.

[25] Translation: "Sister-in-law".

Sneha's response to the following question underscores the conscious and active ways in which women choose to legitimise gendered power relations in the private and the public arenas. She first described herself as a mature person and then used this self-description to elaborate on the ways she came to "appreciate things like patriarchy":

> *T: How have you seen yourself change over the years? Changes in ideas, belief systems and thoughts.*
>
> *Sneha: I have come to appreciate things more… like patriarchy. Initially, I did think that these were conventional thoughts and ways of thinking and they should no longer exist, but as I grew older, I realised if you take the system and observe its positive points when it gives strength and structure to a family, it does have a lot of positives also, and I have learnt to appreciate that.*

Like most women, Sneha believed she was "definitely" "100%" liberated. She left her assessment there and passed the question rhetorically back:

> *T: Do you see yourself as liberated in comparison to women and friends your age?*
>
> *Sneha: Yes, definitely, 100%. Don't you think?*

This curt response helped elaborate on gendered control and how, while some officers' wives associated liberation with controlling marital relations and their ability to voice critique, others, like Sneha, did not make such a connection and experienced liberation in an abstract and ambiguous sense.

Patriarchy (is) for the "other"

In these ways, officers' wives, such as Meena, Divya, and Sneha, personified the archetype of the conservative military wife. They occupied spaces on the D extreme of the patriarchal power (CD) axis and were at the forefront of perpetuating and legitimising patriarchal ideologies — either by negating them as forms of control or by endorsing their necessity in ensuring familial and societal stability.

In these ways, officers' wives, such as Meena, Divya, and Sneha, personified the archetype of the conservative military wife and occupied a position at the D extreme of the patriarchal power (CD) axis. Some officers' wives, like Meena and Divya, masked and framed the gendered division of labour as an outcome of the military profession and rationalised their support in the name of military effectiveness.

Others like Sneha and Meena drew on essentialist assumptions to rationalise gendered familial hierarchies and uphold the public-private divide. Women were seen as naturally suited to the domestic sphere, with traits such as being “caring” and “nurturing” imagined and accepted as “inherent” and “biological”. The masculine, in contrast, was associated with the public sphere and accepted as the “protector” and “provider”. Gendered control over bodily autonomy was either treated as a given, as in the case of Sneha, or actively defended — either to protect the “sanctity” of marriage, as argued by Meena, or in the name of women’s safety, as supported by Divya.

Most crucially, these narratives reveal how patriarchal ideologies and ideas of liberation were interpreted in relative and subjective terms — particularly in contrast to an imagined community of “other” women, often described as “situated in rural India” and presumed to be “subjected to strict social norms, joint family systems, patriarchal marriages, and low levels of education” (Parmar 2003). Officers’ wives (like Meena and Divya) placed gendered roles, restrictions on bodily autonomy, divisions of labour, hierarchies, and financial dependency outside the ambit of patriarchal control. Simultaneously, they emphasised their upper-middle-class, educated family backgrounds as markers of modernity and progressive outlooks and wielded these self-identifications to differentiate themselves as distinct from women they perceived as more traditionally constrained, to “externalise” patriarchy, thereby obscuring its operation within their own lives and contexts and framing it as relevant to “other” women from lower socio-economic backgrounds and conservative familial structures.

Liminal Officers' Wives

It depends on the intention

Tanya did not challenge gendered relations per se but perceived gendered notions as "traditions" whose "objective" or "intention" shaped how she perceived them:

> *T: Do you adhere to the notion of there being a man of the house?*
>
> *Tanya: Everything boils down to the intention and the objectivity of a certain tradition being followed. If the intention is to control or instil fear, then I have a problem. But if it is to bring people together under the nurturing umbrella of an older adult who can share their wisdom with the rest of the family and set an example, I feel that can be a beautiful concept.*

Being supportive isn't for men

Tanya utilised the changing times framework to engage with the gendered division of domestic duties or household responsibilities. She shared how there was no division of domestic duties between her and her husband in her earlier years of marriage. She then explained how there was "now" a "balance" between them, asserted how her husband had "changed with time" and had "started to help out in the house":

> *T: Can you tell me about the division of domestic duties and household responsibilities?*
>
> *Tanya: Earlier, I used to do most of the work, but as I said, since I started changing from within, the balance has started to come in there as well.*

Tanya, similar to Meena, identified the division of domestic and familial responsibilities as a new-age concept. However, she also underlined the role socialisation played in upholding gendered divisions. She emphasised the need to challenge the same socialisation, celebrating her ability to do so with her sons:

> *Tanya: I did most of the work in raising the kids. The fact is that rearing or taking care of children did not come naturally to him. It did not occur to him naturally that he should also step into that supportive role. I suppose that comes from whatever we are taught in our families. We come from a generation where boys and girls*

were taught things differently. I constantly talk to my sons and train them to be better prepared to take care of themselves independently.

She supported live-in relations and pre-marital sex. She compared "sex to water and food" and put forward consent as a necessary condition for such relationships:

T: What is your take on live-in relationships and pre-marital sex?

Tanya: What is sex, after all? It is like water and food. It is a bodily need. So, as long as you are an adult being responsible and taking ownership of your actions, I feel it is okay.

Tanya engaged critically with the concept of patriarchy:

T: What is your take on patriarchy?

Tanya: My take on patriarchy and feminism is that these are not gender-based. Patriarchy is practised by women as well. It is the controlling attitude that men and women have. Women are as patriarchal as men, and there are enough men who support women that are feminists.

Tanya did not end her assessment on the gender order there. She wielded her experience and elaborated on how she believed she had challenged and upheld patriarchal power and its workings.

Tanya shared how, on the one hand, she thought of herself as an "educated, urban" and "open-minded" woman. On the other hand, she also shared how she found it uncomfortable to dry only her private clothing, like lingerie, "outside" — in the "open" public spaces where men can see the clothes drying. She not only attributed these mundane practices to her "mindset" and her "conditioning" to those that she believed did "not allow" her to challenge her habits. She also asserted how her inability to change "little things" made her believe she had "not been able to challenge patriarchy":

Tanya: I have not been able to challenge myself in these smaller aspects, and that is where the deeper work lies. We need to start making these little changes in our day-to-day life. I have not been able to really challenge patriarchy to bring a change in my own perspective and that of the others around me.

Tanya cited the above example to share how she believed she had upheld patriarchal norms from her perspective. Tanya then narrated her relationship with paid labour to establish how she believed she had challenged patriarchal norms in her "own life".

Tanya started working as a teacher after she had her children. She reiterated how "being a teacher" and choosing to teach helped her "balance commitments of the army, family, and work". Tanya shared that she used to leave her job often for military postings. To cite the ways, she believed she had challenged patriarchy, she shared:

> *Tanya: I used to give up on my own work as I shifted from one place to another. However, this time, I didn't leave my job, and this is a massive accomplishment for me. I put my foot down and decided to concentrate on my current job.*

Tanya added "another reason" for not moving — her son's education (the fact that her son would have to repeat a year). She underlined that her "primary reason for not moving" was her "personal work". In an effort to reinforce how not giving up paid labour was a choice Tanya made, she shared how "many people told" her she was losing out on a "huge opportunity to see a new place" and "be with her husband". In contrast, she stated that no such prospects "lured" her to leave her job.

Furthermore, Tanya utilised her "love" for her "work" to self-identify as "different" from other officers' wives. She made a distinction between herself and women, whom she believed were "still very tied down with traditions and cultures" and who, in her assessment, were "unwilling to move with times". Tanya cited another personal example, breaking the tradition of fasting for her husband, to stress how she had moved and changed with time and to defend why she believed she was "a lot more" modern and progressive than other women her age:

> *T: Do you see yourself as liberated in comparison to women and friends your age?*
>
> *Tanya: I come across very few people who think like me. I have opened myself to change and different perspectives, much more than other women have. There has been a lot of shifts in my outlook on most things in life. Something has changed inside me. Earlier, I used to fast for Karva Chauth like a typical bride in Bollywood movies, but now I feel… my god... how could I be like that? How can someone like me, being so educated, support a patriarchal tradition like Karva Chauth?*[26]

Tanya's assertion highlights how patriarchy is perceived and how liberation is experienced in relative and subjective ways, underscoring the connection between liberation and the capacity to critique and articulate that critique. Unlike Meena, who experiences liberation by being able to construct and voice

[26] Karwa Chauth is a Hindu festival celebrated by married women. They observe this fast for the safety and long life of their husbands (Sukheja 2023)

her critique within private spaces of the home, Tanya experiences liberation by not only critiquing but also halting the prevalence of patriarchal customs and traditions such as fasting for her husband.

What man of the house?

Unlike Tanya, Ritu was vocal in declaring the "irrelevance" of gendered hierarchies within her home. She dismissed the notion of the man of the house being the head of the family while simultaneously upholding and challenging the public-private divide as gendered arenas inviting gendered participation.

On the one hand, Ritu produced the public-private divide as she attributed the father to "outside" chores such as "visiting the bank" and, in doing so, treated men's association with the outdoors (the public) as normative. On the other hand, Ritu also challenged gendered participation as she not only undertook the role of being a father but also performed gendered chores associated with the outside:

> *T: Can you tell me about the division of domestic duties and household responsibilities?*
>
> *Ritu: He tries to help as much as he can, but I do most things on my own. Staying alone has taught me a lot and helped me become independent. I have been both a father and a mother to my children and have taken over chores that were previously performed by my husband, like visiting the banks. He hasn't changed any diapers or taken the kids to school. I understand that he has other responsibilities and office work. He helps me out if he is free.*

Ritu's narration corroborated Divya's assertion and highlights how officers' wives imagined patriarchal power as a form of military power, perceived gendered divisions as an outcome of the military profession, and defended such divisions in the name of military effectiveness. It also underscores how officers' wives imagine military life and expectations as opportunities for personal growth and to become independent.

Patriarchy -- a thing of the past

Ritu supported abortions for medical reasons "but not for unplanned pregnancies". Ritu was also "against" live-in relationships and pre-marital sex. She not only shared how she would be "shocked"

if her “kids were involved in stuff like this” but also deemed “sexual relationships” between a couple to be acceptable only “within the institution of marriage”:

> *T: What is your take on live-in relationships and the idea of pre-marital sex?*
>
> *Ritu: I don’t agree with it. If you want to get into some sexual relationship, do it within the institution of marriage and follow the norms of society.*

Ritu simultaneously deemed patriarchy to be a thing of the past and utilised the changing time lens to rationalise her worldview. She cited the prevalence of gendered notions such as men being considered “the breadwinner of the family”. She then wielded her identity as a working woman, as the breadwinner of her family, to evaluate patriarchy’s minimal existence in the present day. She believed “things were almost equal now” between the two genders, as men and women could both act interchangeably as “homemakers” and “breadwinners”.

Ritu did not celebrate her liberated stance like the other officers’ wives. She shared how she “liked to gel with people” who “thought like” her but did not comment on how liberated she felt compared to women her age.

Like other officers’ wives, Tenzin utilised the changing times framework to place concepts associated with bodily autonomy under the “new generation idea” category and deemed such practices to be “common in the present day”. She simultaneously also supported “live-in relationships and pre-marital sex” by employing the same lens and projected her ability to move and change with time as a choice she made that made her ‘unlike’ other officers’ wives:

> *T: What is your take on live-in relationships and the idea of pre-marital sex?*
>
> *Tenzin: These days, wherever you are looking, that is the way of life now. People wanting to live in and not wanting to get married have become very common. I am going to have to accept it and be okay with it.*

Tenzin employed her professional identity as a doctor to defend her view on abortion, including why she supported the practice for “medical reasons” and “not otherwise”:

> *Tenzin: Being a doctor, I think if it is for medical reasons, then yes. Otherwise, no. We should learn how to control our actions.*

A woman can never be the man of the house

Tenzin was a vocal supporter of and reproduced gendered hierarchies within the home and the family. She "absolutely" "adhered to the notion of the man of the house" and elaborated on how "different" her home environment was in the presence of the man of the house:

> *T: Do you adhere to the notion of there being a man of the house?*
>
> *Tenzin: Absolutely. If he is not there, things are different. The carpets are rolled up, the curtains are kept dirty, the table is not laid, and food is eaten in front of the TV.*
>
> *Everything falls in place with the man of the house. A woman can never be a man of the house, no matter how much she must be earning. She has to be a woman, and that is how marriages work. I am a woman of old thoughts when it comes to marriage. Otherwise, everything is fine.*

Unlike Divya, who correlated earning capacity with the maintaining gendered hierarchy within the home, Tenzin negated financial autonomy as a pre-condition for women to be able to adorn the title of the "man of the house", treated men's superiority within the home as a cultural necessity and rationalised her defence by identifying with the "old school of thought".

Tenzin shared that there was "no division" between her and her husband in terms of dividing domestic duties and household responsibilities. She not only took pride in upholding the gendered divide, in associating women with "household responsibilities" and men with "doing a job". She identified as a "lady" and (re)produced the military officer as a masculine figure:

> *T: Can you tell me about the division of domestic duties and household responsibilities?*
>
> *Tenzin: As a lady, I always took care of the house and let the man do his job… his office work, so there was no division. I would never let him carry the baby bag because I always felt that an officer should not carry a baby bag.*

Tenzin shared that she had "some restrictions imposed on" her "through" her in-laws. She detailed how her in-laws expected her to dress a particular way while they were around or serve food to her husband before serving it to herself. She emphasised that she "did not mind these restrictions at all". Tenzin believed she was "ABSOLUTELY" liberated in comparison to women and friends her age and attributed her mobility and freedom she held as an individual to the "army":

T: Do you see yourself as liberated in comparison to women and friends your age?

Tenzin: ABSOLUTELY, and thanks to the army, I can go here and there. I can visit my mom. I can work. I can do what I want to. I have lived my life king-size all because of the army. There are some restrictions imposed on me through my in-laws, but I don't mind them at all.

Tenzin's response underscores how notions of liberation and patriarchal restrictions were simultaneously rendered normative, trivialised, and interpreted in relative and subjective terms — framed both in relation to the constructed idealised image of the officer's wife within the military and social hierarchy and in comparison, to an "imagined" community of women perceived to be subject to ambiguous gendered control.

Tenzin once again cited her support for new-generation ideas, such as live-in relations, to reiterate her ability to "grow with time" and "change with the children". She used these self-identification and descriptions to defend why she believed she was "a lot more" progressive than other women her age:

T: How have you seen yourself change over the years? Changes in ideas, belief systems and thoughts.

Tenzin: As I see my children growing up, my ideas also change. Now, I am growing with time. For me, earlier, having pre-marital sex was shocking, but now, today, I take it with a pinch of salt. We are growing and changing with the children.

It's about men… to an extent

Women (such as Tanya, Ritu, and Tenzin) personified the archetype of the liminal officer's wife and, in doing so, moved on the patriarchal power (CD) axis.

In addition to underscoring that patriarchy is interpreted and liberation is experienced in relative and subjective ways, the above illustrations highlight how officers' wives consciously and critically engaged with patriarchal practices. Women assessed the extent to which patriarchy shaped their lives and articulated how they believed they had either upheld or contested patriarchal power. Some officers' wives, like Tanya and Tenzin, strongly supported contemporary ideas around bodily autonomy and used this support to self-identify as modern, progressive women who had chosen to evolve with the times. Yet, they simultaneously defended and upheld gendered familial hierarchies within the home, either by downplaying their inherently patriarchal nature or by openly aligning themselves with "old-

school" values. In contrast, officers' wives like Ritu challenged gendered hierarchies in the domestic sphere but supported gendered restrictions on bodily autonomy and framed the sexual division of labour in private spaces as an outcome of the military profession, deeming it necessary to uphold the masculinity of the army officer.

Feminist Officers' Wives

Women are the men of the house

Simran did not adhere to the notion of the man of the house. On the contrary, she stressed the need to "broaden" such "notions" and called them out for their patriarchal nature:

> *T: Do you adhere to the notion of there being a man of the house?*
>
> *Simran: No, why can't women be the man of the house? I don't understand this concept. This notion needs to be broadened as, again, it speaks of patriarchy.*

Simran affirmed there existed a division of domestic duties and household responsibilities as she declared proudly, "Sundays, I do not work. He gets me my morning tea".

Like Richa, who wielded her profession as a doctor to rationalise why she did not support the practice of abortion, Simran also utilised her professional identity as a lawyer to support the practice of abortion "by choice":

> *Simran: If a lady is not willing to have children for whatever reason, if she is not mentally prepared to have a child, she should not be forced to have a child as it is the lady who has to bear the entire thing.*

Simran was "absolutely okay" with live-in relations, supported the practice of pre-marital sex, and wielded her own experience of having indulged in such practices.

Simran also did not explicitly celebrate her liberated stance. She surrounded herself with women who she believed had "broadened visions" and asserted how she was "happy" with how she was and her life.

Dismantling the gender order

Isha was amongst the handful of officers' wives who challenged and, at times, even dismantled patriarchal power and its operations. She elaborated on the gender order's prevalence and centrality, asserting how patriarchy "traversed all class and caste divides":

> *T1: What is your take on patriarchy?*

Isha: Patriarchy is everywhere. If you think that you are an educated woman or that you come from a certain background and you are not really holding repressive traditions, you are wrong.

Continuing her assessment of patriarchy. Isha shared how her "entire wedding was a headache" and did so to explain how she believed she had challenged and upheld (in some ways) patriarchal traditions and customs:

Isha: I did take rounds of the fire[27] , but I made it very clear that I would not be having a kanya dan[28]. I was pressured to buy a mangal sutra[29], but it is still lying in my box. I wore my chudha[30] for only the day of the wedding. A lot of women called me a single married woman. Even in my family, they tell me I don't look married.

Isha identified as "the woman of the house" and negated the existence of gendered hierarchies in her home. Isha mentioned how she kept household help with gendered tasks such as cooking and cleaning to outline the absence of a gendered divide in her home.

She shared how she was "totally cool with both" "live-in relationships and pre-marital sex". She supported the practice of abortion while sharing that she had an abortion herself in her first year of marriage as she did not feel ready to take on the responsibility.

Isha, as previously demonstrated, identified as a "very unconventional person" compared to other officers' wives. To reinforce how differently she perceived herself. She shared how her "upbringing was such that" she was "never silenced" and how she "was free to do anything and everything she wanted".

Feminist officers' wives (such as Isha and Simran), in these ways, not only constructed feminist critique, they wielded their educational qualification to detail how they chose to challenge the gender order and occupied spaces on the C extreme of the patriarchal power (CD).

In sharp contrast to other officers' wives, Isha deemed patriarchal control to be "universal" and emphasised its irrelevance with class or family backgrounds. Gendered control of bodily autonomy, gendered division of labour, gendered hierarchies, and gendered financial autonomy were critiqued

[27] A wedding ritual that involves the bride and groom taking steps around a fire.
[28] Translation: A wedding ritual involving the father of the bride 'giving away' his daughter (Chaturthi 2021).
[29] A wedding ritual that involves the groom tying a necklace around the bride's neck.
[30] Bangles traditionally worn by a bride on her wedding day and for a period after.

for their patriarchal leanings. Moreover, for Isha, the experience of liberation was not ambiguous or associated with voicing critique but involved acting upon critique and contesting patriarchal norms.

The Gender Order in Public Spaces

The following section explores how officers' wives engage with domains such as politics, arenas such as combat, and feminism as a movement or an ideology.

Gendered narrations reinforce the layered and moving standpoints officers' wives occupy concerning the gender order. Gendered narrations show how some women continue personifying a particular military wife archetype. Other women move on the patriarchal power axis as they challenge and support gendered notions in public or private arenas. In doing so, they personify particular facets of different military wife archetypes.

First, the officers' wives' relationship with combat is examined. The section explores how most officers' wives invoke notions of (women's and national) security, essentialist assumptions and pragmatism as rationales to defend and reproduce gendered exclusions from state and military structures such as combat.

Officers' wives' relationship to politics as an arena is explored by examining their relation with military power that shapes gendered divisions (conversations) between (men and women) military personnel in military or private spaces. The fieldwork helped identify a common gendered practice of men and women constituting separate social circles in social gatherings. Officers' wives were asked what they thought about the gendered divide, its prevalence, and causation. Women provided many reasons for the gendered divide.

The final section will explore these officers' wives' opinions of feminism as an ideology or movement.

Combat as a Male Preserve

Conservative officers' wives, such as Meena, Divya, and Sneha, and liminal officers' wives, such as Tenzin, treated social constructions of gender as natural and biological. They utilised constructed gendered tropes to uphold and support gendered hierarchies within the home and the public-private arenas as gendered divisions. These women extended gendered relations and hierarchies of the private realm into the public arena. They also invoked pragmatism and various notions of security to produce and uphold "combat" and the "home front" as "masculine" and "feminine" arenas, respectively.

In response to the role of an army officer's wife, Meena proudly established how "women know when to show (their) emotions and their grit". Meena also asserted that the military wife had to be "the stable person in the house" — the one who had to "make major decisions" given that the husbands were not around. Similarly, Tenzin deemed the military wife to be the "pillar" of the military husband and stressed the need for the military wife to "put up a brave front whenever required". Divya celebrated the ability of the officer's wife to be "strong" and "brave" and to be able to "keep a smiling face in the harshest and scariest of circumstances".

Officers' wives, such as Meena, Divya, and Sneha, acted as the heads of their households, "managed" the home front", and were decision-makers for their children and families. They exhibited masculine traits and characteristics and shared the myriad ways in which they believed they had been resilient, strong-willed, or had shown emotional and mental "strength". They had a unique way of underappreciating their accomplishments. Officers' wives believed and attributed the masculine traits, characteristics, or roles they exemplified and performed to the Indian Army. These women believed the military, the role of the military wife, the responsibilities associated with being a military wife, and the army life provided opportunities or chances to acquire masculine traits and perform gendered roles. Women believed the "challenges" and "hardships" of the military and military responsibilities made them "independent", (emotionally) "strong", and "courageous". They did not perceive these traits as "inherent" or "natural" to them as women.

A question of biology

Meena wielded her experience of belonging to the support arms of the army to proclaim how she had "seen" "both kinds of lady officers" in the army. Meena distinguished between two types of lady officers. She noted how she had met lady officers who had "done wonders, were focussed, and did their duty in field postings with great grit and love for the country". She compared these lady officers

to other types of women, whom she believed did “no work” and “left the army to have a family”. After making this distinction, Meena continued her assessment of women in combat:

> *T: What is your take on women officers in the army?*
>
> *Meena: It is difficult to have ladies in the army. We are talking about trying to obtain peace at the borders, so it is better to focus on one thing right now and then think about bringing this change within us. We can bring the change by modernising our army, bringing in modern ammunition, and training our existing lot to do a better job.*

Meena identified as a pragmatic individual when she asserted that national security needed to be “prioritised” over bringing in structural changes in the military apparatus. She also rationalised her apprehension against women in combat by employing essentialist constructions of gender.

Meena believed “men” were “naturally physically stronger” than women and thus “best suited for combat”. She also believed women were “naturally” more “sympathetic and empathetic” in comparison to men and employed these gendered rationales to uphold the public-private divide, to associate women to the private and men to the public:

> *Meena: Women have sympathy and empathy, which is required. If the lady is working and the husband is in charge of the children, he will call her every ten minutes to ask for things and how to do things. He is still dependent on his wife to do things.*

In the name of women’s safety

Sneha also wielded her experience, having had the “opportunity to observe the women officers”. Sneha believed female officers “were more sincere and hard-working than the male officers”. At the same time, she rationalised women’s exclusion from combat, like Meena, by employing essentialist stereotypes and invoking the logic of women’s security:

> *T: What is your take on women officers in the army?*
>
> *Sneha: Let us be honest about it: when it comes to strength, a woman cannot say she is stronger than a man. I feel a woman is more of a risk no matter how strong she is, and it is really not worth it to put them (women) at risk. Women, by the*

nature of their gender, are good at other things like research, multi-tasking, and intelligence, so they should get into such roles in the army. Combat roles are not possible for the women because of the danger.

Sneha not only treated "physical strength" and "multi-tasking" as "natural" masculine and feminine traits, respectively. She also produced women as vulnerable figures needing protection and upheld the gendered hierarchy and relation of protection. The protectionist logic was then wielded by Sneha to constrict women's financial capacity (as outlined earlier) and to defend gendered exclusions in the public arena.

The army is not ready

The idea that women can be "assets" to the army but "only" in "select roles", such as support arms, was also reiterated by officers' wives like Tenzin and Divya.

While Divya simply made the following assertion without detailing her reasoning for her opinion:

Divya: You can't have women in combat arms. The army is not prepared for women officers.

Tenzin made the same assertion and helped understand what Divya was hinting at:

T: What is your take on women officers in the army?

Tenzin: Women are not allowed to join combat because the army is not ready. Soldiers and the jawaans[31] are not educated enough. They (men) don't want to be commanded by women because they will not take it or like it. They (women) won't be taken seriously. It is going to take light years to change this in the army.

Tenzin and Divya defended gendered exclusions by treating and accepting military authority and leadership as masculine. Women employed 'class' hierarchy as justifications for gendered divisions in the public arena while upholding the masculinity of the soldier.

Moreover, the insistence by these officers' wives that the troops or soldiers would be unwilling or unable to take orders from women or be led by women was perceptive. These assertions were intended to stress the idea that such gendered patriarchal notions were held or perpetuated

[31] Translation: "Soldiers".

by "troops" of the Indian Army — by men who belonged to remote or backward corners of the country, not the officers of the Indian Army. In these ways, officers' wives not only upheld and reproduced the gendered hierarchies associated with combat roles but also attributed women's exclusion from fighting units to class hierarchies. Patriarchal mindsets and conservative upbringings of the "other", namely, soldiers in the Indian Army, who were perceived to come from traditional family backgrounds and socially conservative contexts, were the logic wielded to uphold gendered inequality.

It is worth noting how none of these officers' wives (Meena, Divya, Sneha, Tenzin) believed they were being gendered (patriarchal) when they supported women's exclusion from combat arms. Women projected their apprehension as an expression of their pragmatic stance. They believed it was necessary to be "reasonable" or "sensible". They identified as "logical" and "practical" women who accepted "the biological aspects of gender", that "men and women are (biologically) completely different", "better suited for certain roles", or "specific" fields. They were propagators of the different but equal debate.

It is not to suggest that officers' wives did not challenge gendered exclusions or support women "breaking the glass ceiling". Officers' wives, those who occupied liminal spaces on the axis, such as Tanya and Ritu, and those who personified the feminist officers' wife's archetype, such as Isha and Simran, challenged the operations of patriarchal power by supporting women in combat arms.

Tanya considered it a "good thing that the army had opened doors for women" (in support arms). She simultaneously also laid down a condition for women to "serve in combat" by "not playing the gender card":

> *T: What is your take on women officers?*
>
> *Tanya: I am in no position to comment on whether they are a hindrance or an asset because I am not an officer in the army. The only thing I can say is that if a woman chooses to serve in the army, then they have to forget that they are a woman. The gender card cannot be played. I suppose problems occur when this happens. Some women like to be treated like women as and when it suits them.*

Ritu supported "women in combat". She believed "women (could) do anything and everything if given an opportunity". Isha cited the example of girls becoming fighter pilots, stressed the role individual perceptions or socialisation played in perceiving women in combat as "a hindrance or an asset", and deemed the military profession as "just another profession" to support women in combat:

T: What is your take on women officers?

Isha: This is another profession. Why not? In AMC, women can go up to the rank of LT Gen. If they (women) can command and control the troops like the men, then why not? I think (them being considered) hindrances come from personal background and personal opinion.

Simran also supported women's inclusion in combat and did so by critiquing "the patriarchal system", one she believed was "still upheld in the armed forces". She asserted the need for the army to "change" with time and "be ready for" women "even if it is not":

T: What is your take on women officers?

Simran: Women are taking up so many professions and excelling in them, especially the corporate ones. The mindset of the people has changed. In government services, women have become IPS officers and have challenged the patriarchal system of police and the IAS fraternity. In the armed forces, we still have a patriarchal system. Even if the women have been given chances of entering the profession, they have been restricted to some branches only.

Politics as a Masculine Arena

During the interviews, I gave my participants disclaimers before entering new themes. I used to name the topic or the theme before asking questions on that theme, for instance, before asking officers' wives about their opinions on the military and their views on their lives in the military. I used to inform my participants that the following questions would be about the theme of the military and their experiences of military life. Similarly, I gave a disclaimer before entering the socio, cultural, and political part of the questionnaire.

The responses to the disclaimer, "The next section is politics", were very insightful. They helped me identify how some officers' wives (such as Meena, Divya, Tenzin, and Tanya) acknowledged politics as a masculine field. Women (such as Meena, Divya, and Tenzin) either expressed their disinterest in "political matters" or wielded men's proximity to the public arena as a rationalisation for political conversations to be gendered. Other officers' wives (Ritu) mask (patriarchal) gendered divisions as an outcome of military power and situated politics outside the fray of the military apparatus. Tanya and Isha were amongst those officers' wives who acknowledged how politics is considered a masculine arena in the military and were critical of how women were expected to avoid political discussions.

The most common rationale provided by officers' wives to explain the causation of the gendered divide involved the use of the phrase "shop talk". Officers' wives accepted or acknowledged men and women engaged in different (gendered) topics of conversation, entailing gendered themes, subjects, or matters. Women elaborated on how the officers primarily and overwhelmingly engaged in "office talk" and discussed military matters, such as postings, hierarchy, and strategy. Themes or topics officers' wives considered women were unaware of or disinterested in discussing. Wives also detailed how women engaged in different topics of conversation — those entailing the domestic, the private, the family, and children, related to children's education, schooling, clothes, shopping, jewellery, cooking, and maids.

Meena shared that she could "talk about anything" but not politics. In doing so, she, at the very outset, displayed her disinterest in political questions. Divya shared how she "hated reading newspapers" and how politics never "interested" her and asked me to move on from the political questions in the questionnaire. These women also affirmed in relative ways how their husbands were interested in political affairs. Meena nonchalantly shared that her husband "enjoyed such conversations". Divya endearingly shared how she voted for a particular political party "only because" her husband and in-laws had voted for that party. In these ways, women imagined politics as a masculine arena by asserting their personal disinterest in politics.

Tenzin deemed it “very rare” for women to engage in political discussions or conversations:

> *T: What is your take on the traditional divide in the MES?*
>
> *Tenzin: Different groups talk about different things. We talk about where we have been, our postings, the kids, school, shopping, and places to visit or eat. The men talk (about Kashmir or the abrogation) because, at some point in time, they have been there, so they know what it is, and they have the knowledge to talk about it. We (women) are not there, so what do we talk about.*

Tenzin first attributed the gendered divide to different (gendered) interests, a reasoning employed by many other women. She also treated men’s proximity to conflict regions as the logic for men to indulge in political conversations.

Ritu established and celebrated the military as an “apolitical” and “professional” organisation, where she deemed political conversations were discouraged between military personnel altogether.

Tanya and Isha were among those women who acknowledged the gendered divide and its prevalence. They asserted how political conversations were considered to be of male interest in the military.

Tanya first provided “officers” engaging in “shop talk” as a reason for the gendered divide. She then shared how she believed women with opinions were dismissed by officers of the Indian Army. She attributed the gendered divide to the “patriarchal attitudes” of military officers and shared how she decided to engage in political conversations:

> *T: What is your take on the traditional divide in the MES?*
>
> *Tanya: That has not changed at all, even at house parties or private parties. The men often only stick to themselves and talk to themselves. They only talk shop. Women speak about other things, so having common topics to discuss segregates them. At the same time, what I feel is that as a woman, if I have an opinion about certain things or if I am more informed about things around me, that is not entertained or accepted readily. Officers feel challenged if you (as a woman) have an opinion. Most officers in the army have a highly patriarchal attitude.*
>
> *Over a period of time, I have also realised that to keep on airing your opinions in gatherings doesn’t serve a purpose. So, in that sense, now I speak up only where I feel the space and place is such that I can.*

Isha established how “common” it was for women to speak about particular themes and for them to “stick” to them.

In answer to the same question, Isha responded:

> *Isha: Men are mostly in the bar drinking. We, women, are made to sit on the couch with the senior officer’s wife. Women talk about maids, where they stay, where their house is, where to buy things around, clothes, shopping... It is the end-all and be-all of life for them. One misses interesting conversations.*

Feminism, to an Extent

Officers' wives shared their "honest", "frank", and "candid" opinions on feminism. They helped me to understand how they utilised rationales of (women's) security, pragmatism, or essentialist constructions of gender to engage with the feminist movement and ideology in complex ways. Gendered narratives evidence the critical role women play in upholding and undermining masculinity's relatively privileged status to that of the feminine.

Meena asserted that she was not a promoter of patriarchy or feminism. She proposed a contradictory logic for women to be considered "at par" with men. Meena believed women were "mentally stronger". At the same time, she declared men to be physically stronger and put forward physical strength as the deciding factor to determine which of the two genders is fitter:

> *T: What do you think of feminism?*
>
> *Meena: If you want to promote feminism and claim that the genders are at par, then we should be ready for a fistfight and see who wins. Mentally, we always say that women are stronger, but if they can meet the physical strength of the men, then we are apart. I don't promote patriarchy, but I don't promote feminism either. It is simply about the survival of the fittest.*

Divya was visibly excited about this particular theme. With a sense of assertiveness, she labelled "feminism" "a very confused word". She believed "most people" had a "wrong" understanding of the "concept". In her assessment, people (and women in particular) "confused" feminism "with responsibility". She felt "women" tended to "use feminism" and "play the female card" to "suit their needs and conveniences" to gain "perks and privileges". She cited "expecting a man to pay for a date", "offering a seat", and reservations for women in (Indian) metros as examples. Divya then presented her feminist stance as she stated she took "feminism into account only when it comes to suppressing a woman":

> *T: What do you think of feminism?*
>
> *Divya: I only take feminism into account when it comes to suppressing a woman. Imposing dos and don'ts on women just because she is a daughter, she should do ABC or (the notions such as) women should talk softer, should always be covered, women should come home on time. I hate such lines.*

Divya's response illustrates how understandings of feminism, like the notions of patriarchy and liberation, were rooted in class, familial, and educational hierarchies. Divya believed that families like hers, or more broadly, army officers' families, did not need to engage with feminist thought, as their upper-middle-class status and modern, educated upbringings, in her view, excluded them from being subject to patriarchal control. Patriarchal control was associated with and deemed relevant to an ambiguous category of "other" women in broader civil society, especially in rural India, who were imagined as belonging to lower socio-economic strata and as being "subjected to strict social norms, joint family systems, patriarchal marriages (with controlling or unsupportive spouses), and low education levels" (p.1, Parmar 2003).

After having framed feminism as an ideology necessary to challenge women's suppression, Divya contradicted herself in the same instance. She recognised and defended her contradictory stance in the name of women's safety. Continuing with her assessment of feminism, Divya noted:

> *Divya: The only reason I want my daughter to come home early is because I don't want her to be taken away by the predators. Otherwise, there is no reason for me not to let her enjoy her life outside where the whole world is. So, I don't think there is anything called feminism because then there should be something called masculinism, too. Men can be very nice to women, most of the time.*

Sneha echoed Divya's logic and rationalised restricted gendered mobility in the public arena in the name of women's safety. In response to engaging with the concept of patriarchy, Sneha maintained she "was not allowed to go out after a particular time in the evening" (when she was younger). Sneha then proudly and affirmatively asserted how she "did not see the need to challenge such restrictions in the house and things like staying out late". Sneha employed the logic of "realisation" and her own "safety" (as a woman) to defend her stance:

> *Sneha: Things like staying out late were not something I challenged. I realised the importance of those rules because society is like this. Why should I put my life in danger just because I want to break out and prove that I am free? Why should I go out at midnight and jeopardise my life? I feel these rules are there for a reason, and they exist for my well-being only. It is for my own safety.*

Sneha then supported feminism if the movement, in her view, prevented a woman from "having the freedom" to be who she wanted to be, noting how women "cannot have the freedom to be bad":

> *T: What do you think of feminism?*

Sneha: I see supposedly very educated ladies holding these placards asking for gender-neutral toilets or some crap like that. It is very bizarre. That is definitely not good. A woman, by definition, is about giving life, about being gentler, so feminism should be 'ki koi aapko daba na paye'[32]. You have the freedom to be who you are, but you can't have the freedom to be bad and do all kinds of bad things. You can only have the freedom to be good.

It was unclear precisely what Sneha meant when she asserted that women did not have the right to be "bad". The conversation identified some practices (such as asking for gender-neutral rights, smoking, drinking, and taking part in live-in relationships) that Sneha deemed as "bad things". However, this remains interpretive. The ideology of feminism was once again associated with education and class hierarchies, and the necessity for "educated women" to engage in feminist movements was negated and dismissed outrightly.

Tenzin labelled "patriarchy" and "feminism" as a "dysfunctionality of society". She believed women could be "as patriarchal as men" while also asserting that "there are enough men that support women". Tenzin employed this logic to stress the "need to be balanced in our approach". She also explained why she believed feminism needed to support both men and women in its efforts to challenge "gendered roles":

T: What do you think of feminism?

Tenzin: We need to be balanced in our approach and be deliberate about the kind of change we want to see in society. Men have not been given emotional attention and mental support simply because they are boys. They could have come out to be a softer gender, and their femininity has been trampled upon, so we have to adopt a multiple approach where, on the one hand, movements such as Me Too[33] should be supported. On the other hand, the emotional quotient of men should be acknowledged so that we see a holistic change as far as gender roles go.

Simran did not support the "bra-burning" or the "men hating" aspect of feminist thought and ideology. She stressed how she was in "no way in favour of patriarchy". At the same time, she did not identify as a feminist. She believed women who "echo the idea of feminism" should "have to" "accept certain

[32] Translation: "No one should be able to supress you."
[33] A movement that grew to prominence in 2017 to address sexual harassment and abuse of women in the United States and across the world (Britannica, 2023).

things" and not "always play the victim card", implying women should accept "natural" gendered differences between men and women.

Similarly, Ritu supported feminism to an extent. She believed "fighting for equality" was "important" but also wondered why "equality for one section of the population" required "putting men down", which she deemed was what she had seen happen.

Officers' wives, such as Isha and Tanya, self-identified as "ardent feminists" and were vocal in their support for feminist ideals and goals. They stressed the need to challenge anti-sexist thought without labelling anti-sexist thought as anti-sexist. Isha noted:

> *T: What do you think of feminism?*
>
> *Isha: This is no time to step back. It is mandatory for women to speak up wherever you are, whatever section you belong to.*

Isha, once again, contested claims made by other officer's wives like Divya and Sneha and deemed the movement necessary for "all women belonging to different backgrounds". Similarly, Tanya identified as a "vocal" feminist, stressed the "need" to change "one's mindset", and urged "us to look at the things we do daily" and how we support or challenge feminist thought in our "daily conversations" as an example.

In these various ways, officers' wives engaged in combat, politics, and feminism in complex ways and occupied overlapping or contradictory spaces on the patriarchal power (CD) axis.

Officers' wives, such as Meena and Divya, personified the conservative military wife archetype and continued to retain their space on the D extreme of the patriarchal power axis. Similarly, women like Isha retained their feminist identity and space on the other C axis extreme.

Officers' wives, such as Sneha, Tanya, Ritu, Tenzin, and Simran, moved on the patriarchal power axis as they supported and challenged patriarchal power in different spaces.

Officers' wives who occupied liminal spaces on the patriarchal power axis, such as Tanya, moved closer to their feminist identity and occupied similar spaces like Isha. Ritu and Tenzin also moved on the PP axis as they supported feminist thought *to an extent* but did not occupy feminist spaces like Tanya or Isha. In contrast, officers' wives, like Simran, transitioned from their feminist identity, embodying facets of the liminal military wife archetype in relation to combat, feminism, and politics, and in doing so, moved along the PP axis.

…

To conclude, this chapter has highlighted the complex ways in which officers' wives of the Indian Army engage with the different patriarchal practices and divisions. It underscores how choice constituted an expression of gendered agency. Officer's wives of the Indian Army choose to uphold, reproduce, or critique the workings of patriarchal power and wield their agency (other identity markers and contexts) to self-identify and differentiate themselves from other women in the larger social and military order.

The next chapter examines how officers' wives engage with military and patriarchal power and underscores the moving, contradictory, and overlapping spaces women occupy on the patriarchal-military power axis.

Chapter Seven Part I: Officers' Wives and Social Norms

The previous two empirical chapters have illustrated how officers' wives engage with the micro-politics of military and socio-cultural practices in myriad ways. This chapter explores how officers' wives, whose labour concerning micro-politics of military power has been explored in Chapter Five, relate to socio-cultural practices.

Conservative Officers' Wives

I may be old-fashioned, but that is how it is

Tanvi supported gendered hierarchies within the home and the family, negating financial capacity as a pre-condition for the man being the head of the family. Tanvi chose to and took pride in belonging to the "old school of thought":

> *T: Do you adhere to the notion of being a man of the house?*
>
> *Tanvi: I still believe in pampering the man of the house. He is the primary male of the house. I mean, at the end of the day, whether or not he is the primary earning member, whether he earns more or less, is irrelevant. He is put on a higher pedestal, and it should always be that way. I may be old-fashioned or whatever, but this is how it is. He has to be served first.*

Tanvi shared that there was "zero division" of domestic duties and household responsibilities. She utilised both essentialist constructions of gender and the military profession to explain the sexual division of labour in her home. On the one hand, like Divya, she attributed the unequal division to her husband "being away". On the other hand, she treated men's distant proximity from the domestic and private arena as "natural" and "normative":

> *T: Can you tell me about the division of domestic duty and household responsibility?*
>
> *Tanvi: Zero divisions because, for many years, I have been alone. I have kind of pampered him. I have been much more independent than most of the women around me. I have done everything. I don't think it comes easily to him because it just doesn't. I think he is lazy, and I am a control freak. And some men don't know how the house runs. He's just one of them.*

Tanvi, like many others, also framed pre-marital sex or live-in relationships as new-age concepts. She spoke of other couples she knew whose children had entered such relationships but did not share her opinion on these notions.

Tanvi was amongst those few officers' wives who admitted she would have "made separate rules" had she had a son. Her honest response was insightful. Tanvi (like Sneha) treated freedom, mobility, and independence as masculine traits and associated men with these characteristics. In comparison, she accepted girls as vulnerable and in need of protection while simultaneously defending gendered control wielded on her daughter in the name of women's (her daughter's) safety:

> *T: Can you tell me about the values/traditions/mannerisms you've taught your kids? Would it have been different for boys and girls?*
>
> *Tanvi: For sure. I always wanted a boy to start with. Plus, being in the army, I would have been less stressed if I had a boy because one has to move around a lot, so having a boy would have been so easy. I have a full-time maid and pay her so much because I have a 'girl-child'. She's always with me. If it had been a boy, I wouldn't have worried so much.*

Tanvi not only upholds and reproduces the protector-protected dichotomy but (like Sneha and Divya) also wields the protectionist logic to restrict women's mobility.

Tanvi declared feminism had "been abused to the point of no return". She was critical of feminist thought for challenging the "natural" roles of men and women, celebrated women as feminine figures, associated women with multi-tasking, and was against the demands of equal division of labour, such as division of domestic duties:

> *T: What do you think of feminism?*
>
> *Tanvi: Being female and feminine as a gender is something very special, and I would love to flaunt it. We are a beautiful race. We are very empowered. We are blessed with lateral thinking and can think on multiple levels. I don't want to gender stereotype, but most men cannot think on multi-dimensional levels. But women can.*
>
> *We are stronger and more resilient. It is important for me to mention that when I say feminism has been abused to a point of no return, it is because I have seen too*

many women take advantage of their gender status. I don't want 'such' stance of women, that I cook the food so you do the dishes.

Tanvi engaged with the concept of patriarchy. She cited varied reasons for why she believed she did not have to challenge patriarchy. She first distanced herself from the order through her upbringing. She shared how she was "brought up in a 'modern' household" where she "never had to deal with any kind of gender biases". Then, Tanvi utilised her experience of living alone and managing things independently. Finally, Tanvi celebrated the "soft" nature of military men to underline why she, as an army wife, did not have to challenge patriarchy:

T: What is your take on patriarchy?

Tanvi: I haven't challenged patriarchy in any way because I was brought up in a 'modern' household. I've never had to deal with gender bias like 'because you are a girl, you can't do this'. I've stayed alone. I have become the other way round because I have seen women who take advantage of 'soft men'. The army is full of soft men. Civil guys are stronger and more 'dominating'. Army men are very soft-hearted. They will turn turtle to make their wives and children happy. They care too much about women.

Tanvi's assertion echoed Divya's argument. She believed that upper-middle class, modern, and educated families were not subject to patriarchal control. Instead, she associated strict familial settings, conservative social norms, and patriarchal households with imagined "other" women in broader civil society — particularly in rural India. Tanvi's narrative also illustrates how officers' wives not only reject the idea of the military as a patriarchal space but actively construct the Indian Army as a site of security and modernity, where women are "respected and revered". Moreover, Tanvi helps demonstrate how women invoke the idealised image of the 'officer's wife' and emphasise the social and symbolic capital they hold within military and civilian hierarchies to assert their distance from the observance of patriarchal practices.

After having vocally distanced herself from patriarchal familial settings, Tanvi self-identified as "belonging to the old school of thought". Moreover, she used this identification to differentiate herself from other "modern women" and to articulate her relative "liberated" stance:

T: Do you see yourself as liberated in comparison to women and friends your age?

Tanvi: I feel blessed to be just the way I want to be, which is liberation in some way. I know I am very different from a lot of the 'modern' women. I am very backward in many ways, but this is how I am. I have to be honest.

A woman will take charge if the man is laid back

Richa shared that there was "no division" of domestic duties or familial responsibilities between her and her military husband, leaving her assertion without reasoning. She responded:

T: Can you tell me about the division of domestic duties and household responsibilities?

Richa: None. No division in any sense. I have done all the work all these years.

Like other officers' wives, Richa also celebrated her "very supportive parents" and used her upbringing in a progressive house to explain why she did not have to "challenge patriarchy". At the same time, Richa supported patriarchy as she believed it "helped" in upholding order:

Richa: I believe patriarchy exists, and it should exist because there can never be two leaders. There can only be one leader so that there is no fight for power. I think that will help in things working perfectly.

Richa accepted "leadership and decision-making" as masculine traits. This gendered equation is reinforced as she also deemed "a woman will only need to take charge if the man is relaxed, casual, or laid back". She expressed the necessity of having a "man" to "keep the house and the family together":

T: Do you adhere to the notion of there being a man of the house?

Richa: I think it is necessary. A woman will only need to take charge when (the) man is very relaxed, casual, or laid back. A man of the house is needed to keep the house and the family together.

Richa associated bodily autonomy with the institution of marriage and family. She also hinted at the possible ways she accepted such concepts as gendered. On the one hand, she shared that her son went "on trips with his girlfriend". She made no mention of her daughter concerning this gendered nuance. Moreover, Richa took pride in belonging to that "school of thought" that believed in the "beauty and sanctity of marriage".

Richa's relationship with paid employment was particularly perceptive as it reinforced how women engaged with patriarchal power through the lens of paid labour and how women present their distinct engagement with paid labour as an expression of their agency.

At an earlier stage of the conversation, Richa had shared that she wanted to "become a lecturer", but this was not possible as her parents got her married early in her 20s. In another part of the conversation, she shared how she was not allowed to work until her children attended school:

> *Richa: The rule in the house made by my husband was that before they (her children) started going to school, I was not allowed to work. That suffered for my career also because I had to start again from scratch and could not teach higher classes.*

Richa simultaneously believed taking part in paid labour (irrespective of *when*) was a choice she made that made her unlike other officers' wives:

> *Richa: I wasn't the kind of a person who could go for coffee mornings, have gossip sessions, and talk about other women. I just can't sit idle and need to keep myself busy. I preferred to work.*

Richa's part in paid labour also complicated her sense of belonging and loyalty toward military power. In *choosing* to take up paid employment, Richa challenged patriarchal and military power *to an extent.* At the same time, she chose to "balance" her military responsibilities with her professional job.

Richa narrated how she was aware at the time of the interview that she would *have to* quit her job for her husband's upcoming posting. Richa was "reluctant to quit" and "enjoyed" her financial "freedom". She also projected the decision to quit her job as a choice *she* will make for the sake of her family and her husband:

> *Richa: Now, again, I am going to have to quit my job, but this is not the time I need to choose my career over my family. My working is taking a toll on him and his peace of mind, so I am willing to quit my job.*

Richa dismissed quitting paid labour as an expression of gendered control and masked it as a form of institutional demand. She negated the military as a space that took away her financial freedom. Instead, the military apparatus, for her, was a space that made her "fiercely independent":

Richa: The problem that has arisen is that since I have lived alone for many years, I have become fiercely independent. I have my own mindset, my own way of working, and my own commitments and expectations; in many ways, I have become more authoritative. The change in me is irreversible because I can't go back to being dependent on him because the army forced me to become independent.

Richa did not engage with the question on feminism and chose to "skip it". This choice might have resulted from her being unaware of the movement and ideology, as this was the only question she chose to skip after clarifying what it meant. However, this remains interpretive.

Richa wielded her experience of belonging to "the support services" to make a distinction between "women officers" whom she believed were "very capable and hands-on" and those who were "pampered" because of their gender or made excuses using their gender. She meant to imply that women could (and should) not use their gender (menstruation as an example) to escape the military rigour that male officers had to endure. She also asserted her scepticism towards women officers, whom she believed made excuses as mothers and utilised their mother's identity to take special leave:

T: What is your take on women army officers?

Richa: I think they are both a hindrance and an asset, as I have seen both types. If she is an officer, she needs to behave like an officer and take on the duties and responsibilities of any officer. No excuses were allowed for PT or drills. The woman officer could not attend PT during those days of the month but could not give this excuse to my husband, so I thought, 'I will help her in whichever way I can'.

We had another lady officer who had a small child. She used to always ask my husband for permission to leave early. So, we realised that the women officers tend to take advantage of the situation. When you wore the uniform, you knew the obligations that came with the job, so you can't make excuses such as these.

Richa also attributed the gendered ideology held by the "troops" of the Indian Army as another reason why she believed women should not be included "in combat because of their gender":

Richa: So, there are good and bad fish. They (women) are good for some select roles and in some select services but have no place in combat roles, considering simply their gender and the men around them. Our soldiers still belong to conservative

rural backgrounds. They still come from a mindset where women are supposed to be indoors, and this is not the way to break their ideas and the ways they think.

Richa was amongst those officers' wives who acknowledged politics as a masculine arena in the military. Richa considered it "impossible to have an intellectual conversation with the women". She shared how conversations "only" revolved around "the home, the maid, and jewellery". Richa attributed this gendered divide to be an outcome of women being "unaware" or "uninformed" about topics that went beyond the "home", the "family", or the "children":

T: What is your take on the traditional divide in the MES?

Richa: Ladies are unable to interact. It is impossible to have intellectual conversations with the women. They can only talk about the home, the maid and jewellery. They remain unaware. They don't know anything or are uninformed. In today's day and age, the division has widened further because of the class of people joining the army. The army is no longer appealing to the well-to-do men.

The man of the house is interchangeable

Heena defined "patriarchy" as "where the head of the family is male" and recognised gendered hierarchies as archaic practices. Simultaneously, she upheld gendered hierarchies and roles as she associated with men and women, perceived the men as the "providers" and the women as the "makers" of the family:

T: Do you adhere to the notion of there being a man of the house?

Heena: Yes, I do. Maybe (these notions) don't exist any longer. Times have changed, and the man and the woman run the family together, so we have to coin another word for today's situation. He is just the provider. She is the one who makes a family what it is. The woman actually runs the family.

Heena attributed "no division" of domestic duties and household responsibilities to institutional outcomes. She also stressed how the unequal division of labour was not a reflection of intent on the part of her military husband:

T: Can you tell me about the division of domestic duties and household responsibilities?

Heena: There has been no division. I have done everything. It is not like he would not want to help, but he had no time.

Heena's relationship with paid labour was erringly similar to that of Richa. Gendered narrations once again reaffirmed the utilisation of paid labour by officers' wives as frameworks to engage with patriarchal power and assert choice.

Heena, sharing her experiences with "employment" and years of working, narrated how her husband asked her to quit her job:

Heena: Except in one stage where I was working. The timings were very long. He was understanding enough until his posting came to __, and our son was pretty small, so I had to take care of my house and my son. I remember crying so much. He sat down with me, calmed me down, and asked me, 'What kinds of ladies have stuck on here (in her job) for so many years? Which ladies in your organisation have happy family relations and a happy married life?' And then I started thinking, and he was right. I realised those women were spinsters, divorcees, or were unmarried.

Heena also did not perceive her husband asking her to leave her job as an expression of gendered control. In contrast, her sense of "realisation" was something she was proud of. Heena realised it was unlikely to have a successful married life and a professional career. She also did not imagine the military expectations, which required her to give up a "good paid job", as challenges that made her "unhappy". Heena attributed her "very ability" to be "so good" in her job to the "army":

Heena: I realised and left my job. While I felt very bad leaving it, the reason why I was so good at my job was because of the army. The army groomed me and made me what I am today.

Once again, the military institution was negated as a patriarchal organisation and constructed as a space of opportunity for personal growth.

Heena supported the practice of abortion and declared, "It should be a matter of choice." She framed concepts associated with bodily autonomy as "new generation ideas". Unlike other officers' wives, Heena did not label "live-in relationships or pre-marital sex" as Western notions. However, she emphasised how "these notions won't be accepted or can't be accepted in India" and used this rationale to defend her apprehension.

Heena also presented the most intriguing logic to defend her apprehension against feminism. She also framed feminism as a "this generation" idea. She then wielded her experience of being a woman who belonged to the older generations, those generations of women who were not privy to the ideology of feminism, to ask how "not thinking about feminism" "made a difference" to women (of her generation) and their "personalities" or their "upbringing".

Heena then utilised the "maintain the balance" logic to support her apprehension for feminist thought and did not support feminism if it took the form of "extremism":

> *T: What is your take on feminism?*
>
> *Heena: Nothing in excess is good. Everything has to be balanced. You have to strike a balance in society. We should not get into a race to compete with the two genders. One will not survive without the other. There is nothing that we have lost as women. As we were growing older, we didn't think of feminism. Do you think it has made a difference to our personalities or our upbringing? I don't think so.*

Women as the boss of the house

Richa's husband had asked her to quit her job for a particular posting. Deepti shared how her husband "did not like her being a teacher" altogether. She narrated:

> *Deepti: I started working after my second child started going to school. He didn't like it when I was teaching because I would go before him and come back after him, and he would be a small child complaining about who was going to heat the food. He is very encouraging of that (her current profession as a freelance writer). He has me around all the time. He is a typical Indian male who is happy when I am around.*

Deepti negated her husband's dislike for her taking part in paid labour as a form of gendered control. She derived a sense of satisfaction from her husband wanting her "around all the time". Moreover, Deepti treated women's association with the domestic as normative. She identified herself as the "boss of emotional things" and associated the domestic with herself:

> *T: Do you adhere to the notion of there being a man of the house?*
>
> *Deepti: Yes, but it depends on the issues. There are certain things where I am the man of the house and other issues where he is. For example, when buying a house*

or where to buy a house, he is the man of the house. What to cook? I am the man of the house. Planning a holiday, he is the man of the house. So, areas are divided, and it depends on the situation. For emotional things, I am the boss, and for non-emotional things, he is the boss.

Deepti was "completely and absolutely" against "live-in relationships and the idea of pre-marital sex". She deemed bodily autonomy as threatening to the "sanctity" of the body and placed it directly within the realm of "morality":

T: What is your take on live-in relationships and pre-marital sex?

Deepti: Completely no. Absolutely no. Just no to both. The body is a temple, and one has to maintain the sanctity. Once you cross the line, you won't find it a big deal to cross the line many times. My younger daughter came and told me she would get into a live-in relationship. This is my final decision, and I don't plan to change it.

Deepti supported abortion "by choice". Deepti also did not engage with the question of feminism and chose to "skip it". She shared how she did "not have much idea about this but had heard a lot about it from" her daughter, who she labelled a "hardcore feminist".

Deepti identified as "a modern woman". She cited her "very ability to have open conversations" about homosexuality or live-in relationships" as expressions that affirm how "much" she had "changed over the years".

In these various ways, Tanvi, Heena, Richa, and Deepti engaged with patriarchal power in complex ways, the same ways they did with military power. Officers' wives like Tanvi chose to remain aligned with the conservative military wife archetype in relation to patriarchal power, supporting practices such as abortion only for medical reasons. In contrast, Richa, Heena, and Deepti moved along the Patriarchal Power (PP) axis, embodying facets of both the liminal and conservative archetypes, and expressed being "okay" with abortion as a matter of "choice" while simultaneously engaging with the micro-politics of military power in distinct and specific ways.

Liminal Officers' Wives

No head in my family

Jyoti challenged gendered relations and hierarchies in her home. She negated the concept of having "a head" in her family. Jyoti also "counted" the gendered responsibilities her husband took on to negate the prevalence of gendered divisions in her home. In these ways, she challenged the public-private divide while acknowledging the gendered character associated with the gendered "roles":

> *T: Can you tell me about the division of domestic duties and household responsibilities?*
>
> *Jyoti: In our house, we don't have any gender-typical roles. If my husband comes home before me, he lays the lunch and vice versa. He washes the clothes as well. It is weird that I am counting these out, as these are considered duties that are restricted only to women.*

Jyoti acknowledged that "patriarchy existed in every stratum of society" and self-assessed how she had "conformed" to or challenged the gender order. She first wielded her military officer identity, performing what she believed was "considered" "a so-called man's job" to affirm how she believed she had challenged the gender order. She then shared how, as "a married woman", she "kept fasts" only because she was "expected to" by her in-laws and attributed this practice to her "subconsciously" "giving into patriarchy":

> *T: What is your take on patriarchy?*
>
> *Jyoti: It exists in every strata of society and even in our generation. I will quote a small example: a woman who doesn't have a job can easily get married in comparison to a man who does not have a job. An unemployed male is an absolute no-no as he is considered to lead and head the family. (Such notions) exist in every part of society. We are far away from making things equal.*

Jyoti continued to personify facets of the feminist military wife archetype. She shared how she was "completely okay with live-in relationships and pre-marital sex". She deemed bodily autonomy to be "extremely important". She also stressed the need for "(Indian) society to imbibe" such notions in efforts to make "society" less "prejudiced". She also supported abortion "completely" as "a matter of individual choice".

Jyoti also moved on the patriarchal power axis. Jyoti supported feminist ideology in the name of "equality" between men and women. Simultaneously, she articulated her apprehension towards the movement as she believed the movement had turned into "a trend" and "a bandwagon" that "people who are educated and had bookish knowledge" tended to "follow blindly" without "understanding the theory and the essence behind feminism".

Jyoti's understanding of feminism, much like that of officers' wives such as Divya and Tanvi, who align with a conservative archetype in relation to patriarchal power, was shaped by class, familial, and educational hierarchies. Like Divya, Jyoti believed that families like hers, or more broadly, army officers' families, did not need to engage with feminist thought, as their upper-middle class status and modern, educated upbringings, in her view, excluded them from patriarchal control. Like Tanvi, Jyoti associated strict familial settings, conservative social norms, and patriarchal households with imagined "other" women in broader civil society, particularly in rural India, and supported feminist thought to "empower" the "marginalised" woman situated in lower socio-economic rural contexts. Moreover, like Tanvi, Jyoti framed the Indian Army as a space where women are "respected and revered", invoked the idealised image of the "officer's wife", and emphasised the social and symbolic capital they hold within military and civilian hierarchies to assert their distance from the observance of patriarchal practices.

Fighting is a man's job

Jyoti moved from occupying feminist and liminal spaces on the patriarchal power axis to embodying features associated with the conservative archetype. She put forward her *pragmatic* stance and employed various rationales, including the "conservative background of the troops", military bonhomie, and the logic of national security to uphold combat as a masculine arena.

Jyoti associated men "naturally" with leadership and accepted that military professionalism was conditional to gendered leadership. She did not believe women in combat was an expression of "women's empowerment" and defended military policy on combat from the "perspective" of national security. Moreover, Jyoti believed gendered inclusions could "loosen" male bonhomie, which she considered "essential" to the military profession:

> *T: What is your take on women officers and women in combat?*
>
> *Jyoti: I don't think we should look at this from the perspective of empowering women or (as a means to prove) women can do anything men can. The institution*

> *is trying to secure the nation. If you try to dilute it to this (including women in combat), you end up loosening the essence of the organisation because the men, and here by men, I mean the troops who are coming from such a societal background, these men are not ready to be led by women. They will not take orders from women as leaders. To change the perspective of the men, it is going to take a lot of time.*

Jyoti took for granted that change would take years to occur. Moreover, she reinforced how officers' wives imagined gendered exclusions as an outcome of class hierarchy rooted in conservative values and mindsets of the troops and soldiers of the Indian Army.

Feminist Officers' Wives

I am not a traditional homemaker

In response to the role of an army officer, and after critiquing the subordinate role Noor believed the military wife played, she added:

> *T: What is the role of an army officer's wife?*
>
> *Noor: It is like any other wife. Yes. Maybe as an army wife, you have to be far more independent in managing your logistics because the husband is not around. You have to be as much a man in terms of managing the outdoors, the bank, the groceries, and children's admissions than any other middle-class wife would ordinarily be.*

Noor attributed the outdoors to the man. She also stressed how she (and the military wife) challenged gendered divisions and boundaries of the inside and the outside. Shen asserted the necessity of the officer's wife, in particular, to be masculine and "independent" in "managing" everyday "logistics".

Noor shared how she believed she had "upheld" or "challenged" patriarchy. In making these assertions, she reinforced how she imagined and associated men with the public outside world. She noted that she accepted authority as gendered or supported the public-private divide as it "suited" her:

> *T: What is your take on patriarchy?*
>
> *Noor: I feel I am not as experienced or exposed to worldly things like how banks work, paperwork, or filing my taxes. I have left all this to my husband. Also, I depend on my husband for advice or to make big or small decisions. I tell my children that I am going to have to ask Daddy. I have promoted him as the being of higher authority. I am fine with this. I get a lot of work done like this without moving a finger.*

After having self-assessed the ways, she believed she upheld patriarchy. Noor narrated that she challenged patriarchal norms by taking part in paid labour and not letting her "identity get subsumed" by her officer husband:

> *Noor: I have challenged patriarchy in ways like endeavouring to work in whatever capacity wherever I could. I have had a place for myself beyond being known as a Mrs. ___. I have not let my identity get subsumed because of my husband.*

Noor was "okay" with live-in relationships and pre-marital sex as long as "both the parties involved knew the stakes" and cited changing times as a reason for her support. She believed "times had changed" and chose to "stay relevant" within shifting outlooks. She also "absolutely" supported abortion "by choice".

Noor proudly declared she was "a hardcore feminist". She narrated how she "did not give her daughter a kitchen set to play with for the longest time". She supported feminism as a means to ensure women's safety and security:

> *Noor: How can you even say that we are taking feminism too far? Just standing up for the basic rights of each individual to have a life of safety and not feel vulnerable in a crowd. We (as women) just want to feel safe. I mean, the whole question is misplaced.*

Noor had made her hardcore feminist stance in response to being asked if she had different rules for her son and daughter or if she believed she had "brought them up differently". She proudly asserted how her "son and daughters played with the same toys" and had to "do the same amount of work" around the house. At the same time, she emphasised and supported feminist thought to ensure women's mobility in the public arena. She also added:

> *Noor: Of course, I was very scared of sending my daughter out alone to buy anything, so I would send her out with a brother. I didn't want her to go out alone for safety reasons because I didn't want her to be teased or have anyone misbehave with her. But, otherwise, I have treated them equally.*

Noor's narrations reinforced a sentiment shared by many officers' wives, particularly those with daughters. Most women wielded their identity of being the mother of daughters to express their support for feminism but also wielded the logic of their daughter's safety (the logic of women's safety) to support gendered control while negating control as a form of patriarchal control.

Noor continued to move between the feminist and liminal spaces on the PP axis. She believed women officers were "as much worth their salt as anybody else irrespective of gender". She wielded her experience of meeting "exemplary women officers" to support women in combat. Simultaneously,

she cautioned the need for women as officers to not allow their "personal or domestic matters to hinder their ability to complete required military tasks". Noor endearingly shared that she had "plenty of regrets". Noor conceded she "did not follow" her "profession" or treat her career "seriously". At the same time, Noor did not believe she held restricted choice. She regarded her ability to "re-invent" herself, "flow with the tide", and "multi-purpose" her "skills to various advantages" as choices she made:

> *Noor: I am doing something as simple as teaching, but I am very proud of where I am, and I hold that place very close to my heart about being my own person.*

Moving with time

Preeti challenged gendered relations and hierarchies in her home. She proudly asserted how her husband "never decided anything without asking" her. She also emphasised how "decisions in the family" had been "changed because" *she* did not "agree on something".

Preeti cited the example of her daughter asking her a question about marriage and intimacy to support why she was "perfectly fine with it" (bodily autonomy) while simultaneously accepting such notions as "new generation ideas":

> *T: What is your take on live-in relationships and pre-marital sex?*
>
> *Preeti: I don't think the present generation gives a damn about these things. My daughter doesn't think there is a big deal in keeping your virginity. She asked me, 'How is it okay for two families to allow their children to sleep with a stranger, having known them for merely two months but not sleeping with a man you know?' My daughter asked me this, so I am okay with it and am perfectly fine with it. I think this is the way society is evolving.*

She engaged with the concept of feminism using the lens of socialisation. She supported feminism and underlined the "subjective" acceptance of feminist thought in different families. Preeti stressed how different she believed the present generation was from her generation, citing distance from marriage or having a family as examples:

> *T: What is your take on feminism?*

Preeti: I have a daughter, and she is from (a well-reputed college in the country). This depends from family to family. Maybe this will not happen at __ (referring to her neighbour's) house. The ability to bend is a sensibility that comes from the family. What the family teaches their sons and daughters.

There are so many couples in this present generation who have consciously decided not to have children. My daughter wants to adopt. These are lofty ideas. I don't know whether they will materialise, but that is her thought process, and I respect that. For today's generation, marriage is not the be-all and end-all of things.

Continuing with her assessment of feminist thought, Preeti added:

Preeti: Families do not give their children the freedom to experiment with things in their lives, especially girls.

Simultaneously, she also put forward her practical stance:

Preeti: We have to be practical and careful. When I go to pick her up, I tell my daughter to wait inside the station if I have been delayed.

Preeti believed she was "very different from other officers' wives" around her. She believed she had "changed with" her daughter and "grown" with time, and her ability to do so made her "different".

Officers' wives such as Jyoti, Noor, and Priya moved along the Patriarchal Power (PP) axis, embodying different aspects of the conservative, liminal, and feminist military wife archetypes in relation to patriarchal power while simultaneously engaging with the micro-politics of military life in distinct and specific ways.

Chapter Seven Part II: Officers' Wives and Military Presence

This second part of Chapter Seven highlights how the wives of officers (such as Meena, Divya, Sneha, Tanya, Ritu, Tenzin, and Simran), whose relationships with patriarchal power were explored in Chapter Six, relate to the micro-politics of military power.

Building on this empirical analysis, the chapter sheds light on gendered political labour — specifically, how the officers' wives featured in this study perceive and interpret the Indian Army's presence in regions such as Kashmir, how they 'make sense' of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), and how they engage with allegations of the army's misuse of special powers. The analysis demonstrates how officers' wives invoke myriad notions of security, essentialist gendered assumptions, and realist ideologies to engage with "state-centric militarisation" (Chenoy 2000, 2004). The objective is to reinforce the complex, contradictory, or overlapping standpoints women occupy concerning military and patriarchal power as expressions of agency.

Loyalist Officers' Wives

Be a "rock support" for the military husband

Officers' wives, such as Divya and Meena, personified the loyalist military wife archetype through their engagement with the micro-politics of military power while simultaneously supporting patriarchal practices in distinct ways. Divya deemed the "first and foremost role of the wife" was "to be a rock support for her husband" and to "keep a smiling face in the harshest and scariest of circumstances":

> *T: What is the role of an army officer's wife?*
>
> *Divya: The first and foremost role of the wife is to be a rock support for her husband. The officer has major responsibilities that have drastic consequences. It is a matter of life and death. We (officers' wives have) kept a smiling face in the harshest and scariest of circumstances. Through AWWA, we have played a critical role in empowering women entering the army.*

Divya reiterated and detailed the "empowering" welfare served. She noted how effective welfare had been in reducing class and rank hierarchies and bridging the gap between officers, soldiers, and their families. She believed:

> *T: What is your take on the AWWA, Ladies' Meet, etc? What do you make of these events?*

Divya: Our (the officer's wife) role is to empower women (soldiers' wives), to make these women self-reliant and independent by providing them vocational training of all kinds. Today, the gap between the officers' and the soldiers' wives has been bridged due to such initiatives. Now you see the soldiers' children are joining the army.

Moreover, Divya employed welfare as a means to self-identify and differentiate herself from "most senior officers' wives", who, in her opinion, were more interested in fanfare than "interacting" with the soldiers' wives. She then used this identification to stress how she "listens to women's troubles sincerely" and did her "best to make sure the concerns got addressed". She stressed the "deep sense of fulfilment" she has "derived over the years from helping these women":

Divya: The purpose of interaction was lost. Not many senior ladies would interact or were interested in finding out about the welfare of the wives and about what is troubling them. For example, the vegetable vehicle coming later or having water problems. Or they were marital issues. I gave them advice and helped them keep a happy home.

Divya also imagined the military as a family. Similarly to Preeti, she compared the "senior lady" to "a mother-in-law" and imagined the control wielded by the senior hierarchy to be similar to familial control. She then utilised this family framing to encourage women to "be okay" with military hierarchy:

T: What is your take on the wielding of rank and hierarchy by women?

Divya: This depends on the person. There are senior members in your family also. I am of that mindset. It is like him telling his wife about his own home, how his parents are, and how to behave with the MIL. It is like that in the army. It is the officer's responsibility to guide his wife.

Simultaneously, Divya deemed it essential for the "ladies" to consider themselves "part of the army act". She rationalised the investment of women's labour in the name of "giving back" to the organisation while imagining the military as a benefactor providing its personnel with "innumerable perks and privileges". Divya nonchalantly stressed the need for "career-oriented women" to "balance" military responsibility with their professional aspirations (and paid labour). This becomes evident as she engaged with "new generations" of military couples entering the army:

T: What do you think about the new generation coming into the army?

Divya: Things are becoming difficult now. Even if the ladies were rude to us once in a while, I would equate them to mothers shouting at us. Women don't consider themselves as part of the army act. Women have 'careers' these days, so they don't have the time to participate in army activities. I have a problem with that because the organisation has supported you all your lives and will continue to do so even if, God forbid, your husband is not there. You need to support the organisation in some way and contribute in whichever way you can. Nobody is asking you to give up your job, but the girls these days are just not bothered. If you don't want to give back to the organisation, don't take the perks and privileges the army gives you.

Divya acknowledged that the army was "conservative" and "a male-dominated society". She accepted that women were "expected" to be "prim and proper" and supported the practice of grooming. Paradoxically, she dismissed "guiding or teaching" young brides how to behave in the MES, where to talk, where not to talk" as "small things". On the other, she deemed these "regulations" as "protocols" of the Indian Army that were necessary to "maintain discipline, decorum, and order". She also reinforced the claim that it was grooming that made the officers' wife "different" and "a class apart". She treated women being ogled at by men as expected, as she accepted men's sexual desire as natural and supported gendered control in military settings in the name of military "decorum":

T: What is your take on the practice of grooming in the army?

Divya[34]: We are expected to behave in a particular manner, carry ourselves in a particular fashion, and speak in a particular manner. These things are actually doing good for the ladies. Today, things are very liberal as the ladies can go to the MES wearing a salwar[35] suit. The army is known for its discipline, decorum and order. If you have a lady behaving stupidly, that will be an eyesore. We have these men roaming around… you cannot expect a sahayak[36] not to ogle at you (if you are dressed inappropriately).

[34] The following is not a response to only one question. But a combination of questions such as grooming and new generation coming into the army.
[35] Type of loose gathered pants women wear with a long piece of top.
[36] The term is used more generally in Indian society to refer to a helper who ordinarily works in people homes. In the army, the phrase is synonymously used with 'batmen', or personal orderlies, who are soldiers assigned to army officers.

The soldier is separated from his wife. The behaviour, body language, and demeanour of officers and the ladies are outstanding, and that is what makes the army a class apart. One can notice or point them out in a large crowd. This comes from the grooming and the protocols the army enshrines in you.

Divya celebrated the military as a "beautiful organisation" and attributed the person she was to the army:

Divya: Whatever I am today is because of the army. Thanks to the army, I have learned and evolved so much.

Divya concluded her reflection on the Indian Army by comparing the military to "very good soil" and emphasising the "specific role" she believed officers' wives could play in producing the "military as a family". She also defended this gendered familial role in the name of military effectiveness:

Divya: She (the military wife) can get the balance, the softness, the emotional quotient. When your husband is in a position of power, if the woman is nice and has a benign kind of nature, it gets people together. It is all going to go towards the performance of the military.

The military wife has to be stable

Like Divya, Meena also occupied spaces on the B extreme of the military power axis. She reiterated the supportive role of the military wife and associated the military wife with the domestic. In addition, she asserted the "stable" and "balancing role" she believed the military wife played while also associating the military wife with decision-making:

T: What is the role of an army officer's wife?

Meena: She has to be the stable person in the house, take care of the parties, the coming and going of people, taking care of the children. The major part is still played by the mother as the husband is the earning member. The role of balancing family and knowing that the husband is not available 24/7 to make major decisions. So, keeping a stable head and playing a balancing role.

Officers' wives, such as Divya, emphasised the need to reduce women's labour investment and change the functioning and implementation of events. Meena had "issues" with this change. Gendered events

such as welfare and Ladies' Meets to Meena were "breathers" that allowed her time "away from the family and the kids". She proudly narrated how she had "participated in every single thing ever" and deemed the "experience" to be "fantastic". Moreover, she was critical of the "new generation" of "young ladies" coming into the army, who she believed were reluctant to invest their labour in the organisation and depended on 'outside' labour for these gendered events:

> *Meena: I know of people who have been putting money and spending so much cash in getting people from outside to dance, perform, and do the decoration — what for? Where is your unit's talent?*

Meena shared how she used to take "classes" for soldiers' wives, teaching them "how to cook fancy gourmet meals", and happily recollected how they used to organise pickle-making competitions among them. These examples were cited to emphasise the critical role she believed such events played in "bringing women from all ranks together" and helping "make soldiers' wives feel they are just like us".

Meena was amongst those officers' wives who completely denied knowing about the practice of voluntary assessment:

> *T: How do you feel about the practice of voluntary assessment?*
>
> *Meena: I have no idea what you are talking about. My husband has never ever told me what he writes or what he got in his report. We don't discuss anything related to the ACR.*

She supported gendered control exercised through military practice such as grooming as forms of "guidance" and deemed it "necessary" to "teach" women the "protocols" of the arm. Moreover, Meena treated military hierarchy as normative. She cited examples of knowing senior military hierarchy to stress the necessity of upholding military hierarchy:

> *Meena: Now, for example, I am very good friends with the __ wife (a senior in the Indian Army, someone senior to Meena's husband in age). We (the senior lady and Meena) are of the same age. We went to the same school, but given her rank and position, I have to call her Mrs. I cannot call her by her first name in military parties. It is a part of the learning process, of how you give and show respect.*

In sharp contrast to some officers' wives (like Isha and Tanya) who found maintaining their identity in the military apparatus challenging, Meena shared how amalgamating her identity with her husband's

was something she “learned”, and she took pride in her “double identity”. Meena stated with pride that what she “loved” “most about the army” was how “people came together as a family”.

Liminal-Militant Officers' Wives

Sneha represented those officers' wives who neither projected explicit support for military power the ways Meena, Divya, or Tanvi did. Neither did Sneha claim to challenge the micro-politics of military power like Isha. She expressed her distance from military power and apparatus:

> *T: What is your take on the Indian Army?*
>
> *Sneha: I have not been interested in his profession or what the organisation is all about. I have stayed a little away and don't know what is happening in the army.*

Sneha then shared the reason for her distance from the apparatus. She shared how her husband "faced many issues and landed in trouble with the seniors in the army". Her husband had since left the army, which was the reason for Sneha's relative distance from the apparatus. She ended her assessment of the military by declaring that the army gives the military couple a "predictable and comfortable life":

> *Sneha: He faced many issues with the seniors in the army as they wanted him to focus more on his duties. He used to finish his work and get free to do what he wanted, but this didn't go well with his seniors. He did land up in trouble for that and ended up getting posted to bad stations, which also affected us a lot.*

Sneha believed "the role of an army officer's wife" could not be "summed up". According to her, the role was "different" for "wives just commissioned into the army", those wives whose "husband had already completed six or seven years in the army" while asserting "the experience as a senior officer's wife" to be "very different" from the above officers' wives and their experiences in the army.

Sneha engaged with the gendered events from a third-person perspective without placing herself within the spectrum of providing welfare or using welfare as a framework to self-identify. She noted how she had met "ladies" whom she believed had "through welfare and AWWA" made "genuine efforts" to "make a difference". She cited examples of vocational training and computer courses introduced in some stations for soldiers' wives to support her claim. She considered other gendered events, such as Ladies' Meets, as "social functions" for women to "get together".

Sneha had a unique way of challenging military power without negating its necessity. She did not challenge the practice per se. Instead, she trivialised how the practice was understood. Sneha's response to grooming also provided insights into understanding how Sneha associated the military wife with the domestic, support, and nurture:

T: What is your take on grooming in the army?

Sneha: I think grooming is a very strong word because it gives the impression that a lot of training is involved in being an army officer's wife, whereas I feel it does not play such an important role. What is there to learn, actually? You just need to understand that you need to support your husband, pack stuff, take care of kids, and come dressed to the parties. There is nothing so big that one needs to be groomed. It is just three or four points that one has to remember.

Sneha treated the practice of voluntary assessment of gendered contribution as a normative feature of the military or any profession. She also defended the practice in the name of military effectiveness:

T: How do you feel about the practice of voluntary assessment?

Sneha: The army is like that. If a man is happy in his married life, it is good for any organisation. Now, in the army, he is leading people into war. I feel that the seniors need to know that he is alright when it comes to the home front.

You must give back

Ritu characterised her experience in the military as a "mixture of good and bad" and echoed the supportive role of the military wife. Similarly, she restated the "socialising" function of gendered events such as Ladies' Meets. Ritu considered these events "opportunities" for women to "meet people, make friends, dress up, and enjoy". She supported Ladies' Meets but was critical of other gendered events such as welfare. She stressed the redundancy of welfare in the present day and impressed upon the necessity of the army to "change with time":

T: What is your take on the AWWA, Ladies' Meet, etc?

Ritu: Ladies' Meet is okay. But coming to AWWA, I feel certain things are not required. In some places, we still follow archaic practices like pickle or candle making and teach women how to stitch or embroider. The army knows very well that such activities are redundant, but they continue with them. In other stations, they (the army) have introduced personality development programmes, but more emphasis should be laid on these activities.

In contrast to Meena and Sneha, who reproduced class and rank hierarchies and nonchalantly legitimised the assumed superiority of the officer's wife in "making a difference" in the lives of soldiers' families, Ritu explained why she believed the Army should "move with time". She emphasised the changing social and educational backgrounds of soldiers' wives and stressed the need for officers' wives to restructure welfare in ways that better support them. Ritu did not consider soldiers' wives to be a social group holding regressive or traditional views; however, she did describe them as a group in need of attention and supported the investment of labour in their direction in the name of women's "personal growth and development":

> *Ritu: (Soldiers' wives) these days are very well aware, very modern and educated. At times, I feel they (soldiers' wives) are much better than even us (officers' wives), but they don't get that attention or opportunities. We need to focus more on things that are necessary for today's day and age, things for their personal growth and development.*

Ritu shared how she "did not know the dress codes for different army gatherings" or "how to conduct" herself in "official spaces". She recollected how she was "groomed very nicely". Ritu simultaneously also imagined grooming as a "tradition" of the army and shared how she carried on the "legacy":

> *T: What is your take on grooming?*
>
> *Ritu: Whatever I was taught, I take that legacy forward and guide the young girls coming into the army. How you should conduct yourself, how you should speak to your juniors, how to keep your house, how to organise AWWA events, how we should interact with the soldiers' families... all of this.*

Ritu was "okay" with "women wearing dresses as long as they looked elegant". She supported "protocols" and "norms" of the army in the name of women's safety and also treated "men staring" as normative:

> *Ritu: Why should we make ourselves a showpiece with people staring or giving lecherous looks? There is no harm in following laid down norms, such as wearing suits instead of sarees. Women don't know how to dress according to the occasion or place.*

Like many other women, Ritu believed the army gave her "confidence", helped her "lose" her "stage fright", and made her a "more confident person".

The military wife is the pillar

Tenzin believed the military wife had to be "brave" and act as "a pillar for" the husband:

> *T: What is the role of an army officer's wife?*
>
> *Tenzin: Your husband should see a happy face. One is always required to put up a brave front, even when one is very upset. I have never cribbed in my life, and I am very proud of that.*

On the one hand, Tenzin declared how the "times" had "changed in the army". She cited examples of "ladies drinking, getting tipsy, wearing what they want, talking about their honeymoon or fights they had with their husbands" to establish the ways she believed the army had "gotten a lot more open". On the other hand, Tenzin asserted the necessity of upholding "some" norms, such as dressing "appropriately" in the name of "military decorum". Simultaneously, she treated grooming as a normative feature of the military profession, taking for granted that "being an army wife requires following a certain decorum".

Tenzin appreciated the changes made in the functioning of gendered events. She believed there was a reduced demand for the officers' wives to participate in welfare activities and that there were positive changes in the "attitudes" of the senior hierarchy:

> *T: What is your take on AWWA, Ladies' Meet, etc?*
>
> *Tenzin: Earlier, we, as officers' wives, used to get on the stage. Now entertainment groups come and perform for us. The attitude of the senior officers' wives has changed a lot. We are more independent in making decisions now.*

Tenzin supported the practice of gendered assessment. She believed the lady could "also be at fault". She used the metaphor "taali ek haath se nahi bajti"[37] to respond to this question. She deemed it "crucial" for the wife to "ensure" that her "behaviour" or "attitudes" did not "tarnish his image in the Army". Tenzin admitted that her daughter probably would not marry an army officer. She made this assessment as she believed it to be "very personal" how the individual takes "life in the army and military hierarchy" and how they "respond to hierarchy".

[37] Translation: "You cannot clap with one hand."

Through this assertion, Tenzin exemplified how officers' wives perceived their relation with the micro-politics of military power as their choices. She also believed her daughter would not be able to "adjust". Tenzin took pride in her ability to "not crib, take things in her stride and move on". She admitted it was difficult for the military wife to have a career or be financially independent. At the same time, she presented her decision to "move with her husband" as a choice she made:

> *Tenzin: I went with my husband wherever he went. I picked up a job wherever he went. My daughter probably won't be marrying an army officer, but I feel nothing like the Indian Army and being an army wife…*
>
> *It depends on how one takes it. I am the kind of a person who took everything in my stride and moved on. The experience has been out of the world.*

Be the helping hand

Simran believed "the first and foremost role of the wife" was to "support" the military husband "emotionally" and be his "helping hand". She also believed "things had changed" in the army. She stressed reduced pressure of hierarchy and the better implementation of policies concerning welfare:

> *T: What is your take on the AWWA, Ladies' Meet, etc?*
>
> *Simran: Things have improved by heaps and bounds. Nowadays, there is no pressure on the ladies. We are free to talk to senior ladies. We also give them (soldiers' wives) the freedom to put their foot down if they are uncomfortable doing something. Welfare now focuses more on awareness. We talk about social issues.*

Simran identified as a "social person". She supported gendered events as "once-in-a-month social events" and considered them spaces for "fun".

Simran maintained that how grooming was perceived was individualistic and depended on person to person. She then presented herself as "a person who loves to learn new things". Simran imagined military "protocols" as "new things" and shared how she took an interest in learning "how to behave like an army officer's wife":

> *T: What is your take on grooming in the army?*

Simran: I think this depends on person to person. I am open to learning things. I got this book called 'How to Behave as an Army Officer's Wife', which is about how to conduct a conversation or be social.

Officers' wives as "second-grade citizens"

Tanya self-identified as a civilian to project her distance from the military. She believed the military wife "loses" her "identity" within the apparatus, critiqued the amalgamation of military and women's independent identity, and celebrated her decision to "not move" as a choice:

T: What is your take on the Indian Army?

Tanya: The army is a wonderful organisation. There is an essence of community, but definitely, there is a lot of…

For one, I don't consider myself to be an army person. Technically, I am a civilian, you know? As a woman in the army more so, you lose out on your identity completely. You are not even called by your first name. Your name is Ma'am and Mrs. I had to give up work and move. As I grew older, I realised I needed to care for myself. I decided to stay put and go ahead with my dreams.

Like Noor, who asserted she was not bitter towards the army, Tanya reinforced officers' wives' complicated sense of belonging to the military apparatus. She asserted she had "no resentment towards the army". She then proceeded to challenge the supportive role of the military wife, labelling officers' wives as "second-grade citizens". Tanya concluded her assessment of the role of the military wife by critiquing the gendered (masculine) nature of military authority and the inability of the military wife to take part in "actual" (real) decision-making:

T: What is the role of an army officer's wife?

Tanya: There is no resentment from my end. I am not cynical towards the army, but realistically, we ladies play a supportive role. We keep the social structures together, but we are just performing lip service, and, essentially, the officers end up making all the decisions. If women try to get involved and have a say in things, the very same officers who respect you so much start talking about women in a not-so-great manner.

She challenged the very idea of things changing in the army. Tanya considered gendered events as spaces for "credit mongering" and declared the army had "lost track of the bigger picture, such as helping people in need". She believed changes were only superficial and deemed "unsaid hanging pressure" and the fear of social "exclusion" to be as prevalent:

> *T: What is your take on AWWA, Ladies' Meet, etc?*
>
> *Tanya: No amount of singing or dancing has reduced in the army. The pressure is immense and is still very prevalent. You are told you have a supporting senior lady, but the unsaid pressure still hangs. If you end up voicing your thoughts or giving some suggestions that are not appreciated by the seniors, then you are the one who will be left behind.*

Tanya moved on the military power axis from occupying spaces on the A extreme of the axis to occupying liminal spaces. She was critical of welfare and its functioning. At the same time, she also believed welfare and Ladies' Meets could serve as "great platforms for teaching soldiers' wives practical skills". She only felt that the activities involving welfare should be "tweaked", and the "implementation" should be made more effective and, in doing so, reinforced class and military hierarchy within women of the Indian Army.

She continued to personify facets of the liminal military wife archetype as she supported the voluntary assessment of marital relations *to an extent*. First, Tanya confined the practice to more than just the defence services. She then explained why she believed assessing "family relations" in "any job" was "important":

> *T: How do you feel about the practice of voluntary assessment?*
>
> *Tanya: A good family life is important for any job. Your personal life is deeply interconnected with your professional life. It is not just the defence services. If the person is having a good married life, it reflects his personal traits and characteristics.*

Tanya moved back to embodying features of the militant military wife archetype as she engaged with the practice of grooming. She negated the familial military equation, critiqued its association with the notion of respect and shared how she chose to challenge these practices:

> *T: What is your take on grooming?*

> *Tanya: When my husband took up a senior rank, I did not let people wait on me, and I did not like it when they all stood up for me when I entered a room. These are ways to show respect. The basis of such norms is that the army is like a family, and in a family, you get up for elders and stuff like that. I feel this is bullshit. Respect is in your attitude. These other things are just semantics.*

Tanya was amongst those women, like Isha, who challenged the familial framings associated with the Indian Army, those wielded by other officers' wives to inculcate gendered support. She was also vocal in assessing the need for the "army to loosen up", "start accepting changes", and "stay relevant with the time".

The Political Labour of Officers' Wives

This gendered analysis of military control power, presence, or control is significant, as officers' wives' political labour reinforces women's contradictory, shifting, and overlapping standpoints concerning military-patriarchal power. The following illustrations reaffirm how officers' wives treat military power as normative, imagining the military as a family and utilising familial framings to support the military in holding special powers. Gendered narrations will also reiterate how women invoke essentialist gendered assumptions and logic of national or soldier's security to engage with state-centric militarisation.

Few officers' wives needed to be made aware of AFSPA. Most officers' wives legitimatised the military, holding special powers in the name of maintaining law and order (national security) and perceived the powers as protective measures (ensuring soldiers' security). Some officers' wives negated the misuse of power. Others acknowledged some violations concerning the excessive use of power. However, they also trivialised "a few instances" or "cases" of "collateral damage" as a normative feature of any military and in the name of the professionalism of the military apparatus. Most officers' wives legitimised the military presence or control in disturbed areas as a natural, masculine behaviour of the military state apparatus or military men. They simultaneously asserted the necessity of the Indian Army to be aggressive in conflict regions.

Sneha supported AFSPA and stressed how such legislations "worked" and "gave results" as it "put an end to militancy in Kashmir". She wielded "being a part of the organisation for so long" to assert how she found it "very hard to believe that the army had been accused of any kind of excess". In response to the allegations of human rights violations against the army, Sneha was vocal in putting forward her stance:

> *T: What is your take on allegations of human rights violations?*
>
> *Sneha: Who are these organisations? I don't see the same organisations saying anything about the Uyghurs in China, the grooming gangs in London, or the excesses of the Rohingyas. I really don't believe these reports and what they say.*

Heena first presented the military as an instrument of the government performing a state-mandated function. She invoked the soldiers as "our men" and defended special powers in the name of soldiers' protection. Simultaneously, she upheld the necessity of the military men to "retaliate" and "fight back":

> *T: What is your take on AFSPA and the impunity associated with the act?*

Heena: The military acts per the directions of the government. Nobody wants to be in the line of fire every day. When people are harming our soldiers, do you think our soldiers are not supposed to retaliate? Who will protect our army men?

Heena treated allegations simultaneously as "aberrations" and as normative features of any military. She described herself as "pragmatic" before making the following assertion:

T: What is your take on allegations of human rights violations?

Heena: When you have the army's presence anywhere in the world for such a long time, certain aberrations will occur. I will not deny it, but everything has its own pluses and minuses.

Noor maintained that "fear" or "strict measures" were sometimes necessary for ensuring "discipline" and "order" in conflict zones. Noor compared the Indian Army to a tiger and special powers to the teeth of the tiger. She then impressed upon the importance of the army having an "upper hand" in "troubled zones":

T: What is your take on AFSPA and the impunity associated with the act?

Noor: A certain amount of autocratic element will have to come in. There has to be fear in some way, which drives a society to a level of discipline. Otherwise, it can be anarchy. You have to make the army feel they have the upper hand when getting into conflict zones.

Noor engaged with the question from the perspective of the "vulnerable". Echoing a metaphor frequently used by other officers' wives, she conceded "there is an element of truth" to the allegations against the army. Simultaneously, she deemed these violations as "collateral damage" and rationalised "army action" in the name of state sovereignty and national security:

T: What is your take on allegations of human rights violations?

Noor: Dekho ghehoon ke saath ghun bhi pista hai... toh kahi na kahi zyaadtiyan zaroor hoti hain[38]. That is for sure. I mean, if somebody is going to come into my

[38] Translation: "At some level, in some places, there is misuse of power…" There is no literal translation for this metaphor. It is meant to imply that innocent people are also impacted indirectly, like the culprits. The closest English metaphor that explains the phrase would be: 'When bulls fight, crops suffer'. It is worth noting that this metaphor was used by several other officers' wives to engage with this question.

house, I am certainly going to feel vulnerable and vindictive, but the house will also still need to be ransacked. So, if there is a sense of rebellion against the mainland, then the army's actions are not unjustified.

Tanvi evoked a collective "our" while perceiving special powers as "an umbrella" over "our" (the army's) "head" "which protects us" (the army). She deemed these powers as necessary to "equip" military men "living a hard and dangerous life":

T: What is your take on AFSPA and the impunity associated with the act?

Tanvi: It is like an umbrella on our head. Something above us which protects us. It is a hostile state, so at least you are equipped with something. Why get our men tortured?

Tanvi's myriad and, at times, contradictory responses to allegations of military misconduct offered valuable insight into how officers' wives simultaneously trivialised and acknowledged certain instances of power misuse. On the one hand, she framed such misuse as a normative feature of any military institution and dismissed allegations as exaggerated. On the other, she negated the possibility of abuse by invoking the ideal of strict military professionalism:

T: What is your take on allegations of human rights violations?

Tanvi: These things can happen anywhere. It is a judgement of human error. One swallow doesn't make a summer[39]. So, these things also get blown out of proportion. I am sure these things have happened. Aisa bhi nahin hain[40] that our men are made of 'gold', but at the end of the day, we have a very strict command.

Richa also referred to the soldiers as "our" soldiers, signalling the same sense of personal identification and allegiance as Tanvi and Heena. She drew on her perceived proximity to conflict zones to justify the military's exercise of special powers. While emphasising the "traumatising" experiences of military personnel stationed in border regions, she simultaneously underscored the army's role in "keeping the place together", legitimising its presence and actions through a narrative of sacrifice and national cohesion.

Like many others, Richa was vocal in supporting the necessity of the army being aggressive and "using force" when necessary. She recognised "some" "violations" as "collateral damage". She defended

[39] Explanation: "One instance of an event does not necessarily indicate a trend."
[40] Translation: "It is not like our men are made of gold."

those few instances in the name of national security, public interest, and military professionalism. Richa believed responsible individuals would have been "reprimanded", "given warning", or been "disbarred from service altogether". She ended her assessment by asking about the "soldier's human rights":

> *T: What is your take on allegations of human rights violations?*
>
> *Richa: Even the soldiers and the officers are human. In some cases, there is an excess of power being used. Violations do happen. It is not right for me to negate it totally, but I would still say that if the military was not there, the trouble would be much worse. If the army doesn't use the power to pick up men, the locals will only suffer. Showing force and violence is their only way of getting even.*

As a "serving army officer", Jyoti chose to "skip" the question on the army holding special powers. She did, however, engage with the question of allegations against the military. She echoed Noor's logic. Jyoti took as normative that "the rights of the citizens are abrogated in disturbed areas to a certain extent". She noted that "the freedom the citizens enjoy is subject to certain restrictions". She then assessed how "these restrictions are weaved as violations of human rights" while declaring the necessity of imposing restrictions due to the nature of the regions being "disturbed":

> *T: What is your take on allegations of human rights violations?*
>
> *Jyoti: The act comes into force only in declared disturbed areas. In these areas, the rights of the citizens are also abrogated to a certain extent, and the rights of the police or the armed forces are increased to a certain extent. The idea is to curb the disturbance in the area. Nobody enjoys those restrictions, so these restrictions are weaved as violations of human rights, but it must be understood that these restrictions are imposed because the area is declared disturbed.*

Some officers' wives, such as Meena, Preeti and Tenzin, chose not to comment. Meena believed that to have an opinion, one had "to be on the ground" and left her assessment there. Preeti "preferred not to answer" what she described as a "politically motivated question" and was instead curious as to why I had included this theme in my questionnaire and in the research more broadly.

Tenzin was visibly annoyed by the very posing of the question and asked to "move on":

> *"Let us not talk about all this. It makes me very angry such questions. Let us move on."*

Ritu was among those officers' wives who were "unaware of the act".

Once again, this does not suggest that officers' wives were not critical of military power, presence or control in conflict regions.

Divya deemed special powers as a means to "catch militants and terrorists being harboured". She admitted that the army has contributed to some kinds of atrocities in conflict regions such as Kashmir. She then declared it was necessary to have "some kind of accountability" about military power and its use:

> *T: What is your take on allegations of human rights violations?*
>
> *Divya: I will admit that the army has contributed to some kinds of atrocities. I have heard many stories of army men committing atrocities against women. I believe the curbs need to be put… There needs to be some kind of accountability that needs to be put in place.*

Tanya and Isha did not support AFSPA. Fascinatingly, both officers' wives invoked their intimate proximity to men in combat and conflict zones alongside references to books they had read to rationalise their critical stance toward the military's role in states of emergency.

Tanya believed the act to be "one of the reasons" for the "distrust" of "the locals towards the security forces":

> *T: What is your take on AFSPA and the impunity associated with the act?*
>
> *Tanya: I read this 'Blood on My Hands'. It is a first-hand account of an army officer to a journalist. An officer in the army told him about how violent this act has been, how people are abducted, and how locals are made to look like terrorists or tortured and killed. They (the military) have to show certain results. I feel AFSPA is one of the reasons why there is so much distrust from the locals of Kashmir towards the security forces.*

Isha drew on her reading of The Collaborator (2012) to critique military conduct. She spoke about how performance metrics in the army can incentivise violence, suggesting that, at times, the pressure to demonstrate results leads to the targeting of innocents and the manipulation of evidence. She explained:

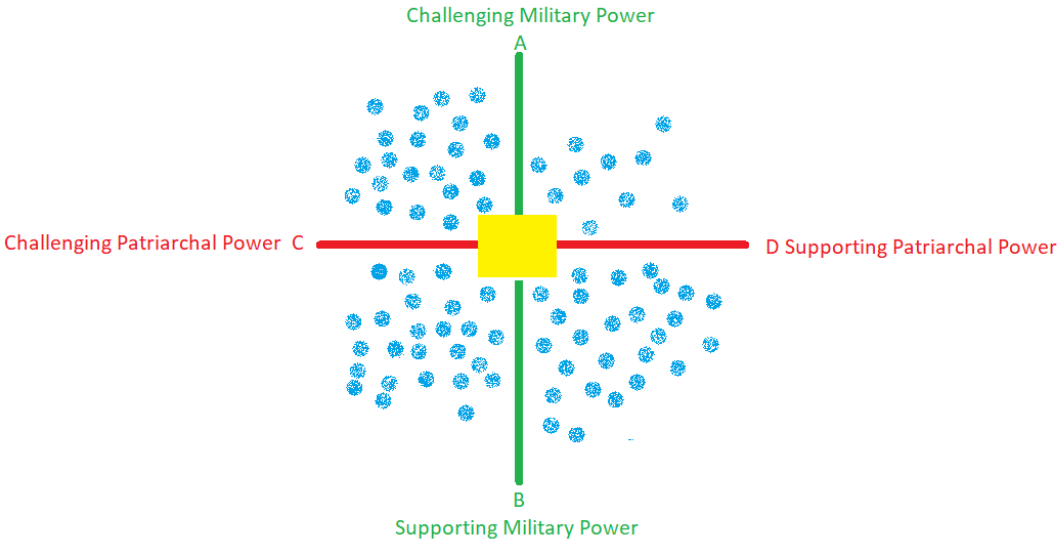
> *T: What is your take on AFSPA and the impunity associated with the act?*

> *Isha: "Read this book called The Collaborator, written by a journalist living in Kashmir. He tells you that there are cases where the army is just looking for kills because if your regiment is not killing enough people, it will affect your career progression in the army... I mean… I am not supposed to talk like this… but there have been incidents where when a militant has been caught, they (the army) will show only 50 per cent of the weapons found with him and keep the remaining to show with another man they catch as evidence."*

Before turning to the next chapter, which highlights the political significance of gendered labour in invoking patriotism, legitimising the military's proximity to violence, normalising its presence, and challenging essentialist associations between women and peace, the following section maps the gendered labour of officers' wives onto the proposed MPP model.

Relative and Moving Spaces on the Axis

Figure 5. Officers' Wives on the Model



The preceding empirical narratives underscore the complex and shifting ways in which officers' wives interviewed for this study interpreted and engaged power. Some officers' wives (such as Tanvi, Divya and Meena) personified the conservative-loyalist 'military wife' archetype concerning military and patriarchal power. They occupied DB spaces on the MPP model, as they supported the gender order and military apparatus and chose to remain tied to the spaces they occupied and the archetypes they personified.

Similarly, other officers' wives (such as S1) personified the militant feminist 'military wife' archetype concerning power and occupied AC spaces on the axis. These officers' wives challenged the patriarchal social order in which they were situated, as well as its associated divisions, relations, and norms. They critiqued the practices and processes of militarisation in both public and private spaces. They also chose to remain tied to the spaces they occupied and the archetype they personified. Most officers' wives moved on the axis, occupying layered, overlapping and contradictory standpoints concerning power and occupied DB, AD, CB, and AC spaces on the MPP model as they challenged and supported power, the gender order, and the apparatus in different public or private spaces in relative and subjective ways.

Some women, like Sneha, aligned with the loyalist or liminal 'military wife' archetypes in relation to military power but chose to remain closely tied to the conservative archetype regarding patriarchal structures. These officers' wives typically moved between DB and AD spaces on the model.

Others, such as Richa, Heena, Deepti, Jyoti, and Preeti, retained loyalist traits in relation to military power while simultaneously embodying features of the conservative, liminal, and feminist 'military wife' archetypes in their engagement with patriarchy. As such, they occupied multiple and shifting positions across DB, AD, and BC spaces.

Officers' wives, such as Simran, personified aspects of the loyalist and liminal archetypes in relation to military power while adopting the feminist archetype when engaging with patriarchal power. The MPP model maps their trajectories onto AC, AD, and BC spaces. Similarly, Noor combined elements of the conservative, liminal, and feminist 'military wife' archetypes in her engagement with patriarchal power while aligning more closely with the liminal and militant archetypes in relation to military power. She moved between AD, AC, and BC spaces accordingly. Tanya simultaneously embodied characteristics of both the feminist and liminal 'military wife' archetypes in relation to patriarchal power, as well as those of the militant and liminal 'military wife' archetypes concerning military power, occupying AC and BC spaces on the model. Lastly, wives such as Deepti, Tenzin, and Ritu primarily personified the liminal archetype in their engagement with military and patriarchal power. Rather than occupying extremes, they moved between DB, AC, AD, and BC spaces, supporting or challenging power in context-specific ways.

Regardless of how officers' wives engaged with power, they never strayed from the axis or shared how their feminist critique was hindered by other wives. Those officers' wives (such as Tanya and Isha) who occupied the AC space on the axis and personified the feminist and militant military wife archetype (or facts of these archetypes) either (like Tanya) chose to support military or patriarchal power in public or private spaces, occupying different AD or CB spaces on the axis, or they (Isha) narrated the negation and reluctance their feminist critique received by other officers wives.

Officers' wives cited threats of social isolation or ostracisation as reasons for the inability of the officer's wife to critique (leave the) military-patriarchal power (model). They believed social isolation was employed as a threat by officers' wives, which made support for feminist critique difficult.

This thesis has also captured how officers' wives who personify the militant or feminist military wife archetype either occupied other spaces on the axis or stressed the limited scope of feminist critique[41]. Women cited threats of social isolation or ostracisation as reasons for the inability of the officer's wife to critique (leave the) military-patriarchal power (model).

One school of thought believed resistance was difficult as the patriarchal structures or military policies did not allow women to be "rebels". They challenged the military organisation and its policies or the larger social order and its ideologies for employing social isolation as a threat that made gendered resistance difficult.

The more dominant school of thought, which invited greater participation of officers' wives, also declared "social isolation" to be an outcome of resisting or challenging power, the order or the apparatus. However, these officers' wives attributed the limited scope of critique to the resistance offered by military personnel, the broader society, and *their* upholding of the larger social and military order, its policies, practices, or ideologies. Social isolation, they believed, was employed as a threat by officers' wives and society, which made support for feminist critique difficult (Hooks 2000; interviews).

As Isha previously noted:

> *You are very conveniently thrust into this role of what they proudly call the 'silent army', and quite frankly, that army of women, complete with their indomitable tolerance built over the years in their efforts to hold some ridiculously regressive traditions, is too silent for its own good.*

These officers' wives underscore a crucial feminist and CMS insight — that "militaries have the capacity for change and that they also comprise people who might have an interest in inducing institutional change" (p. 10, Duncanson and Woodward 2016). Both liminal and militant officers' wives of the Indian Army expressed a commitment to and vocally asserted the need for institutional reform. However, it is the gendered labour and power wielded by women within the organisation that often halts their feminist critique and efforts to transform the military.

[41] This interpretation is based on the labour of officers' wives represented in the scholarship and also based on the larger data set obtained through fieldwork.

Point of Exit?

Enloe asks the following questions and encourages their exploration: "What do challenges to the wielding of power look like? When do those challenges succeed? When are they stymied?" (p. 9, Enloe 2014). Other feminist scholars have asked, "What happens to those wives who dissent? What if she chooses her happiness over the demands of the military machine?" (p. 67, Via in Sjoberg and Via 2010).

This study provides empirical evidence to suggest a possible answer to these questions.

While "widowed" or "divorced" officers' wives as a distinct empirical category remain beyond the scope of this study, this thesis reflects on divorce and widowhood to consider what these lived experiences may reveal about the positioning of women within the military social order via the military-patriarchal power (MPP) model. Attending to these experiences helps engage with Enloe's argument that military widows and divorced military wives often represent the figure of the "militant" wife — women "who have made antimilitarism integral to their agenda and are, perhaps not surprisingly, those enjoying the greatest cultural and bureaucratic distance from the military" (p. 192, p. 196, Enloe 2000).

Within the broader patriarchal Indian social order, widowhood, particularly resulting from military action, is framed as honourable and often valorised (Rashid 2020; Millar 2017). Military widows who lose their husbands in action are often afforded a revered status, accompanied by emotional, administrative, logistical, and financial support from the military establishment and regimental networks. Their upper-middle class background and military affiliation help mitigate some of the forms of patriarchal social isolation or stigma typically associated with widowhood in Indian society. Within the Indian context, military widowhood complicates feminist assumptions that military widows might distance themselves from the institution or withdraw their labour. Military widows may remain deeply loyal to the institution and continue to halt feminist critique of militarisation.

In contrast, divorce within both Indian society and the military context remains highly stigmatised (Chakravarti 1995). The normative expectation that women should "make it work" is deeply entrenched in Indian cultural discourse (Naidu 2011; Thapan 2003; Rao 2015). Within military circles, divorce signifies not only the breakdown of a marital relationship but also the loss of symbolic capital, social prestige, and the unique identity that affiliation with the military affords to officers' wives (Enloe 1988, 2000). In this context, this thesis contends that divorce, in contrast to widowhood, can be interpreted as a powerful act of choice and critique and as a point of exit from the gendered institutions of marriage, military, and family. Officers' wives who divorce their military husbands often

represent individuals who actively choose to withdraw from the patriarchal military-social order. In this context, divorced Indian Army officers' wives not only represent "militant" military wives of existing feminist theorisation. They also underscore the argument as they choose to critique the patriarchal military-social order and maintain cultural and bureaucratic distance from the institution. Furthermore, divorced officers' wives also help underscore the argument that gendered labour undermines feminist critique and actions.

After completing the original draft of this work, I learned through informal networks of two officers' wives who were part of my official fieldwork that lend empirical support to the arguments above. The first was a woman who, during my fieldwork, had closely embodied the characteristics of the "loyalist and conservative" archetypes and supported the operations of military and patriarchal power. The second echoed anti-militarist feminist critiques and embodied the "militant" archetype relationship to the military-gender order. Within a year of my fieldwork, the loyalist wife was widowed, while the militant wife divorced her military husband.

The military widow did not distance herself from the military. On the contrary, she remained situated within the loyalist end of the MP spectrum. Far from critiquing military power, she has drawn on her personal experience to raise awareness of military wives' lives, promote public understanding of their sacrifices, and sustain the memory of her husband's service. Her daughter has published poems reflecting on military loss and fatherhood, and she is now authoring a book about her experiences as a military wife and widow. In contrast, the divorced officer's wife, while not engaged in formal political activism or organising, continued to articulate and identify with anti-militarist feminist critiques. Her departure from the military gender order both symbolically and institutionally demonstrates how divorce, as a form of critique, constitutes conscious individual choice and action.

Finally, this officer's wife described receiving considerable support from her immediate family, relatives, and friends following her divorce. Unlike common patterns of social alienation, these networks did not stigmatise or isolate her based on her marital status. However, she also recounted the persistent critique and social judgment she encountered within the broader military and social world, particularly from other women. Within this institutional community, her divorce was interpreted as a personal failure — an inability to sustain a marriage and fulfil the normative expectations of wifehood and family life. In the eyes of many, she had failed not only as a military wife but as a woman. It is especially significant that much of this judgment came from other women embedded in the military social order — elite, highly educated women who considered themselves modern and progressive.

Despite their apparent embrace of progressive values, these women often reinforced conservative gender norms by viewing divorce as a mark of failure rather than an act of choice. The experience of this former officer's wife not only helps understand how women actively choose to critique power and withdraw their labour from patriarchal social and military orders. She also helps underscore the power of gendered labour in halting, negating, or undermining feminist critique and action. To suggest that they reproduce and perpetuate judgment and scorn because of socialisation or institutionalisation is to undermine the gendered capacity to make choices or think independently.

Chapter Eight: Gendered Labour as Potential Sites of Power

This study offers empirical evidence to understand how gendered labour reproduces and perpetuates the very ideologies of militarisation (Enloe 2000; Chenoy 2000, 2004; Burke 1994), securitisation (Sjoberg 2009; Chenoy 2004, 2000; Manchanda 2001), gender (Krishnaraj 1998, 2009; Peterson 2007; Runyan and Peterson 2014; Cohn et al. 2005), and patriarchy (Thapan 2001, 2003; Krishnaraj 1998, 2009) which feminists are committed to overturn.

Women and Political Realism

The previous chapter has explored new empirical themes, including how officers' wives perceive the Indian Army's role and interpret military presence and control in areas designated as "disturbed", particularly through acts such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and allegations against the army for the misuse of special powers. The gendered analysis of officers' wives' political labour offers a fascinating contrast between the feminist critiques of political realism and its empirical application by women as rationales to support and legitimise military power, presence, and control (Tickner 1992; Runyan and Peterson 1991; Chenoy 2000, 2004, 2012; Manchanda 2001).

While this body of feminist scholars (ibid.) has long critiqued realism for privileging masculinist notions of power, aggression, and state survival, the narratives of officers' wives reveal the significant ways in which gendered labour can both reproduce and unsettle dominant militarised logic.

Officers' wives wielded their proximity to border areas and assumed the experiences and perspectives of military husbands, officers, and soldiers as their own. The Indian state, the military apparatus, and military personnel were often imagined and framed as masculine "protectors" or "guardians of the motherland" (interviews; Sjoberg 2009; Manchanda 2001; Kaul 2018). This "protective" military control was linked to feminised understandings of "disturbed regions" or "troubled zones" and of the population living in those regions — as vulnerable in need of protection (and guidance) by the masculine Indian Army (ibid.). Gendered labour through such framings upholds and reproduces essentialist gender binaries by celebrating aggression, strength, and toughness as inherently masculine traits while framing femininity in terms of passivity, vulnerability, and protection, rendering women as irrelevant to matters and arenas of war and violence (interviews; Peterson 2007; Sjoberg 2009; Eichler 2014).

In doing so, gendered labour not only reproduced the public-private dichotomy but reaffirmed the privileged role of the Indian Army in "safeguarding national interests" (ibid.). They also upheld and

reproduced militarised and realist logics of state security, framing the Indian Army and its personnel (officers and soldiers) as "protectors" of the nation and as "providers" of national security and domestic stability (Golan 1997; Cohn et al. 2005; Eichler 2014; Burke 1994). Essentialist gendered assumptions played an important role here. Women believed that men were "naturally" suited to be "protectors" due to certain biological traits, such as strength, aggression, and the use of force. Women, on the other hand, were imagined and accepted as inherently vulnerable figures 'in need of protection' (ibid.).

Most officers' wives endorsed the Indian Army's use of extraordinary powers under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), framing such powers as essential tools for safeguarding national security, preserving state sovereignty, and maintaining territorial integrity (interviews; Chenoy 2000, 2004, 2012; Manchanda 2001; Tickner 1992). They perceived and framed the army's presence in Kashmir as vital for upholding law and order, disciplining what was perceived as an "unruly" population, and curbing what they interpreted as illegitimate dissent. Drawing on realist conceptions of an "anarchical" political order, officers' wives justified and propagated the Indian Army's' aggressive responses, believing that the state, like the soldier, must be masculine — strong, assertive, and willing to use force and control to "survive" and protect its national borders. Within this framework, everyday militarised violence was accepted and normalised as necessary and legitimate (interviews; p. 4, Basham 2022).

Reinforcing these realist narratives was the repeated invocation of military professionalism. Officers' wives often framed military power, presence, and violence through the lens of "military professionalism", perceiving military control as a form of state-sanctioned, legitimate force exercised "on behalf of the government" in pursuit of "national interest" and "state sovereignty" (interviews; Chenoy 2000, 2004, 2012; Manchanda 2001). Their responses to allegations of misuse of power further exemplified this position. While some wives acknowledged that violations had occurred, many denied them outright or framed them as "aberrations" or "collateral damage" — a normal, if unfortunate, feature of military operations. The assertion that any excesses would have been "reprimanded" further reinforced the trust in the military's internal mechanisms and professional ethics.

Gendered reflections also help challenge the linear or unreflective link of women with peace, non-violence, and pacifism (Eichler 2014; Sjoberg 2009; Alison 2009) and expand the current theorisation of women and their relationship to violence in the context of India.

Invoking their collective identity as “army wives”, women called for an end to the armed conflict in Kashmir and emphasised the need for peace. They expressed that it was their “loved ones” in the “line of duty”, shared their frustration over the loss of “our soldiers”, and vocally affirmed the need to “put an end to our soldiers dying”. Some officers’ wives advocated for “alternative” or “peaceful methods to resolve issues of territorial integrity. Others emphasised the need for nation-states to engage in compromise and find common ground in efforts to reduce or remove special powers and coercive military presence. Yet, most officers’ wives were not particularly “pacifistic”. They wielded their proximity to combat, border areas, and soldier-officers’ lived experiences to dismiss diplomacy as “idealistic” and endorsed the use of coercive power and military force to manage national security threats and uphold state sovereignty (interviews; Burke 1994; Chenoy 2000, 2004).

In these ways, far from being peripheral observers, officers’ wives participate in sustaining and legitimising military operations through their proximity to the armed forces and their everyday practices. Their political labour evidences how militarisation is not confined to battlefields or policy chambers. It is also sustained and normalised through gendered practices in the domestic arena (ibid.). Through mundane conversations and within the private spaces of their homes, officers’ wives produced military violence as “state action” undertaken in the name of “national security”, “law and order”, and the “public interest”.

Evoking Patriotism

Officers' wives wielded their status as insiders to the community and their proximity to "loss" and "death" to express their allegiance and loyalty to the Indian Army.

Most women invoked a collective "our" and "we" when engaging with questions of military power and presence in disturbed areas. They imagined state soldiers as "our boys", experienced the loss of a soldier as the loss of a family member, and extended this familial dynamic to the state organisation to legitimise its functioning (interviews; Enloe 2000; Segal 1986). Moreover, soldiers and officers of the Indian Army were framed as ideal symbols of patriotism, while sacrificing one's life for the safety of the nation was constructed as the 'ultimate' act of patriotism — an act women were excluded and denied from performing (interviews; Tickner 1992; Chowdhry 2010). They emphasised the importance of publicly honouring soldiers' sacrifices as heroic and meaningful. They encouraged people across the country to feel pride, appreciation, and respect for the "brave" and "courageous" soldiers who, in their view, were protecting the nation (ibid.). They framed and produced patriotism as a gendered male-centric ideology and invoked patriotic framings to halt "outside criticism" of the military as something that "inappropriately belittles the hardships" and sacrifices made by military personnel (interviews; Gray 2017).

Finally, gendered labour reveals how violence was acknowledged but "subjectively", primarily through a masculine lens, framing it as experienced by self-sacrificing, courageous soldiers (interviews; Basham 2022).

Women wielded their officer's wife identity as a collective and "distinguished" themselves and the soldiers and officers of the Indian Army as "us" from "them" — the "enemy" "other" in Kashmir (interviews; Peterson 2007; Burke 1994). In doing so, they normalised and defended the Indian Army's militarist responses — violence committed by their "own side" as "legitimate", "necessary", and "(self) defensive" (interviews; Jacoby 2006; Basham 2022). Simultaneously, they perceived and constructed "violence" of the "other" side as "illegitimate", "aggressive", and provocative (ibid.). Officers' wives serve as empirical evidence to underscore key critical military studies insight: social and gendered labour and socio-political labour play a crucial role in legitimising or contesting militarised violence (Basham 2022).

At the same time, officers' wives played a critical role in silencing and normalising gendered violence, particularly within the domestic sphere. Incidents of domestic violence were kept under wraps, with women actively discouraging soldiers' wives from reporting abuse or marital conflicts. Officers' wives advised them to endure fraught relationships, emphasising that their husbands were their primary

source of emotional and financial support. In these ways, gendered labour reinforced the institution of marriage and the military social order, ensuring that gendered insecurities experienced within private and familial spaces remained silenced and hidden (Hansen 2000).

Upholding and Reproducing Military Power

In contrast to existing FSS theorisation[42], the empirical chapters have also highlighted how most officers' wives uphold and reproduce favourable narratives of military power.

Empirical narratives reveal how most officers' wives construct and reproduce the Indian Army as both a "national" and "social security" provider — one that ensures state sovereignty, law and order, and national protection. The military is also framed as a site of symbolic and material security, offering its personnel and their families status, respect, and collective identity, along with job stability, healthcare, education, and recreational benefits (Enloe 2000; Segal 1986). In addition, the military is imagined as a space of opportunity. Many officers' wives perceived the demands and expectations of military life as enabling personal growth, independence, bravery, and confidence while framing the institution as a space for empowering soldiers' wives through skill acquisition and enhanced domestic decision-making. In these ways, officers' wives, through their gendered labour, not only utilised but actively reproduced strategies of militarisation while simultaneously downplaying the patriarchal character of the military by affirming narratives of women being "treated as royalty" or "put on a pedestal". These favourable framings were invoked to rationalise their engagement with military power and as incentives to encourage other women's voluntary investment of gendered labour within the military apparatus.

Some officers' wives were critical of the familial dynamic, its extension into the military apparatus, and its fraught nature. The military was frequently imagined as an extended family where military hierarchy mirrored familial relations and respect for senior officers was likened to the deference expected toward elders within households. Within this framing, women emphasised the emotional labour expected of the military wife to cultivate and sustain a sense of belonging and emotional attachment within the military community. They paradoxically employed this same familial logic to motivate officers' wives to contribute unpaid labour to the organisation in return for this constructed familial sense of belonging the military provided.

In doing so, these familial imaginaries and notions of security not only shaped how women perceived their roles and interpreted their positioning within the institution but also served as tools through which militarisation was normalised and legitimised in everyday life.

[42] As highlighted by Chenoy 2000; Sjoberg 2009; Manchanda 2001.

Gendered Essentialistialism

Feminist and constructivist theorisation[43] has sought to displace essentialist gendered perspectives and constructed gender hierarchies and dichotomies. This study presents a compelling paradox: it highlights how officers' wives in the Indian Army, while challenging essentialist and reductive gendered notions by embodying and asserting traditionally masculine traits and attributes, simultaneously uphold and reproduce essentialist assumptions, gendered hierarchies, and dichotomies.

Officers' wives elaborated on how they had challenged traditional gender roles and divisions within their households and the broader military order. They took pride in their ability to "live alone", "manage everything", assume the roles traditionally assigned to fathers, and "take care of things independently". Many celebrated their resilience, declaring that they had been "bold" and "strong" over the years, made difficult decisions for their families, and demonstrated bravery in the "scariest of circumstances" (interviews).

Officers' wives had a unique way of simultaneously celebrating and trivialising the masculine traits they believed they exemplified. On the one hand, women espousing masculine characteristics were deemed necessary to "being a military wife" (Spanner 2022; Enloe 2000). Women who saw themselves as "self-reliant" often took pride in their ability to "take on the father's role", using it as a marker of strength and self-identification. In doing so, they not only reinforced their self-image but also criticised other officers' wives who struggled to "keep up" with the demands of military life. On the other hand, the ability to personify masculine attributes by "the military wife" was imagined to be the outcome of the military profession in itself. Most officers' wives who celebrated their ability to be strong, brave, or independent believed the military made them who they were or provided them with opportunities to gain these attributes. They did not believe the masculine characteristics they exemplified were "biological" or "natural" to them.

Instead, officers' wives took for granted that men are inherently more aggressive and that caregiving or mothering is an innate trait of women (Shepherd 2010). They frequently associated qualities such as rationality, autonomy, strength, and assertiveness with masculinity while linking emotion, vulnerability, weakness, nurturance, and interdependence with femininity (Tickner 1992; Peterson 2007). These essentialist understandings of gender difference, framed as biological or natural, were

[43] As highlighted by Peterson 2007; Chowdhry 2014; Thapan 1995; Dube 1988; Karlekar 1998; Wilcox 2009; Cohn et al. 2005; Eichler 2014; Shepherd 2010; Krishnaraj 1996.

then drawn upon to legitimise and sustain gendered hierarchies, exclusions, and control within both social and military institutions.

Politics is a Masculine Arena

Through their everyday gendered labour and interactions within private military spaces, officers' wives often reinforce the very gendered divisions that feminist scholars seek to dismantle, as many framed or imagined politics as an inherently masculine domain and subject of interest (interviews; Tickner 1992; Cohn 1993; Cohn et al. 2005). A handful of officers' wives attributed the gendered divide between men and women in military social circles to the "patriarchal attitudes" of personnel and emphasised how those who engaged in "intelligent" or political conversation were often perceived as having "crossed a line" or behaving in a manner considered "un-ladylike". However, most women rationalised the gendered separation in social gatherings by offering a range of explanations.

Some expressed genuine disinterest in political matters, while others framed the military as a professional and apolitical institution where political discussion was deemed inappropriate, thus rationalising their disengagement. Many reinforced traditional gender norms by citing men's proximity to the public sphere or conflict zones as a rationale for their dominance in political conversations. However, the most widely accepted explanation was framed by the notion of "shop talk". Officers' wives reproduced and upheld gendered ideas — that men and women naturally engage in different types of conversations — with men discussing topics like postings, operational strategies, and rank. In contrast, women focused on domestic themes such as childrearing, household management, and cultural and social activities (shopping, fashion, movies, etc.). These gendered conversational norms normalised and re-inscribed the boundaries of masculine and feminine knowledge, reinforcing politics as a male-dominated domain (ibid.).

Combat is for 'Men'

The empirical chapters of this work evidence how Indian Army officers' wives do more than observe and acknowledge the military as a masculine world. They actively and consciously engage with military policy regarding women's inclusion in combat.

Officers' wives, some of whom had served in the Indian Army as officers themselves, complemented and celebrated the competence, strength, and professionalism of women serving in the support arms of the army. However, this recognition was often accompanied by the endorsement of gendered exclusions from combat roles. Drawing on a "biological logic" and the rationale of "military effectiveness", women legitimised the intimate link between masculinity and soldiering (interviews; Eichler 2014; Chowdhry 2014; Golan 1997).

Some officers' wives deemed physical strength a necessary precondition for entry into combat roles, arguing that women needed to match the physical standards of men (interviews; Chowdhry 2014). At the same time, these women often criticised those who exhibited traditionally masculine traits, describing them as "unfeminine" and failing to meet accepted social standards of femininity. Women who took on masculine roles or held authority over male soldiers were frequently perceived by most officers' wives as unnatural or "out of place" (ibid.).

Moreover, many officers' wives upheld the gendered and institutional rhetoric that "male bonding" and camaraderie were essential for maintaining operational effectiveness in combat units. The presence of women was seen as a potential threat to masculine cohesion, and exclusion was framed as necessary for preserving military discipline and national security.

Through their gendered labour, officers' wives reproduced the public-private dichotomy and associated gendered participation. Masculinity was associated with the state, national security, combat, and protection. At the same time, women were positioned as best suited to "ordering" and "comforting" roles — within the private sphere as mothers and wives and in the public domain through support roles in military intelligence, logistics, teaching, nursing, and social work (interviews; Tickner 1992).

Gendered-'Realistic' Security

This study has also underscored the political significance of gendered labour in halting and advancing feminist critique of securitisation — state-centric, realist conceptions of security and the construction of the state and the military as a provider of security (Chenoy 2000; Sjoberg 2009; Manchanda 2001).

Empirical reflections highlight how officers' wives of the Indian Army simultaneously invoke and reproduce "state-centric" and "alternative" understandings of security.

On the one hand, security was articulated in realist, statist terms — defined as national security and defence against external threats — and upheld as the foremost responsibility of the state. On the other hand, women invoked personal, domestic, and relational understandings of security tied to familial and economic stability, personal comfort, women's safety, and the physical well-being of soldiers (interviews; Hyde 2017).

Some officers' wives also reconceptualise security from the perspective of individual women's lived experiences and articulated critique that aligned with feminist theorisation of security (interviews; Chenoy 2000; Sjoberg 2009; Manchanda 2001). Officers' wives were critical of how women were not truly safe, as their behaviours, attitudes, and movements were constantly restricted in the guise of their protection. They identified structural gendered inequality and restricted gendered mobility and autonomy as a security problem (ibid.).

Within these conceptualisations and framings of security, very few women considered women's safety and broader dimensions of human security as priorities equal to national defence or the protection of soldiers.

Gendered labour, in this context, played a paradoxical role: while it contributed to the construction of alternative and feminist understandings of security, it simultaneously undermined comprehensive security frameworks and constrained feminist security perspectives — those developed by the women themselves and those articulated by other women.

Another critical observation this study makes is exposing how officers' wives bestow power to the masculine in the name of their security or safety. In contrast, they restricted the feminine, taking away their autonomy and independence in the name of their security or safety.

Officers' wives deployed protectionist logic to uphold gendered hierarchies — privileging and prioritising the safety and security of the masculine over the feminine. In doing so, they reinforced

gendered insecurities and contributed to a system in which women retain little control over the conditions of their protection (Sjoberg 2009; Tickner 1992; Manchanda 2001).

As previously discussed, violence was rendered visible through a masculine lens. This is further underscored by the ways in which many officers' wives, through their gendered labour, normalised or trivialised sexual violence and harassment against women (Das 1996). While some profusely denied allegations of misconduct by military personnel, others acknowledged occasional incidents of misconduct but framed them as isolated acts of individual pathology rather than recognising them as manifestations of broader systemic issues.

In this context, on the one hand, men, in particular the soldiers of the Indian Army, were masculinised. Officers' wives often evoked the soldier's ("rural" and "conservative") socioeconomic and family backgrounds to defend gendered control and exclusions. They were vocal in declaring how it was difficult to "change the mindsets" of men from "different social and educational backgrounds". Simultaneously, the "male gaze", expressions of sexual desire, and what was termed as "young men acting out" were framed by officers' wives as natural male behaviour or instinctual urges, particularly among men who had been separated from their wives for extended periods. Within this logic, the presence of women in combat roles or remote border postings was perceived as dangerous — exposing them to heightened risks of harassment or violence (Enloe 1988; interviews). As a result, most officers' wives legitimised the structural gendered exclusion of women under the guise of protection.

Conversely, the military institution and its personnel, both officers and enlisted men, were also subject to feminised framings, constructed as vulnerable figures in need of protection. This feminisation was undertaken in two ways: by highlighting soldiers' proximity to conflict zones and by invoking their pre-military familial identities. Soldiers were imagined and sympathised as devoted family men, separated from their spouses and children, engaged in selfless national service, and enduring dangerous and traumatic experiences. Consequently, officers' wives rationalised and defended the special powers granted to military personnel, such as those under AFSPA, as necessary protective or defensive measures to ensure the soldier's safety and security.

The feminisation of the (masculine) soldiers by officers' wives served to justify the holding (and gaining) of powers as necessary for protection. In contrast, the feminisation of women as inherently vulnerable was used to justify their exclusion from combat roles under the guise of safeguarding their safety.

Similarly, in private military spaces, women as feminine entities were subjected to greater policing in the name of their security. Empirical chapters in this work have highlighted how most officers' wives treated the soldier's sexual "urges" as "natural" and negated military practices such as grooming as forms of control exercised. In contrast, most women framed grooming as "protocols" of the army essential for upholding military decorum and preserving the idealised image of the officer's wife within the military social order. Women in this process negated the military hierarchy between the officer's wife and the soldier, upholding the soldier's masculinity while invoking the protectionist logic to justify the policing of women's behaviour (interviews; Eichler 2014; Peterson 2007). The discourse of security and protection operated in such convoluted ways that the security of the masculine was prioritised and privileged. The feminised status of women resulted in gendered exclusions, restricted autonomy, and limited mobility in both public and private spheres, often in the name of safety (Sjoberg 2009).

It is important to reiterate how the "protectionist logic" wielded by officers' wives played a central role in legitimising both militarised state interventions in conflict zones and gendered control within private military spaces. In public conflict zones, the Indian Army and state were defended as protectors of vulnerable populations, with restrictive and coercive measures justified in the name of national security and safeguarding civilians. In private military settings, the masculinity of the soldier — often framed through biological reasoning or socio-familial background — was invoked to justify the regulation of women's behaviour.

The Paradox of Gendered Autonomy

Being a military wife entailed doing a "job" or "working" for the apparatus through welfare and other gendered events. A few officers' wives insinuated or demanded compensation for the voluntary labour they provided through welfare. Some officers' wives also urged the necessity of evolving the role or scope of "the military wife" and implementing "structural" changes in the operation of welfare functions. Most officers' wives accepted the unpaid and voluntary nature of military roles and responsibilities in the name of social security, women's empowerment, and personal growth (and fulfilment).

Gendered narrations have also captured how women treated the inability of the officer's wife to have a career or be "career-oriented" as a normative feature of the profession. Women recognised that the career opportunities for officers' wives were "limited" or "restricted". For that reason, they encouraged women to adapt their own lives to the military job and pursue careers that "allowed" women to "move" with their husbands or were "accessible online". Moreover, officers' wives supported "career-oriented women" and gendered financial independence while emphasising the necessity for women to ensure their jobs do not "interfere" or "prevent" them from fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives, which many of them deemed "natural" and "inevitable". While some supported a more balanced distribution of labour in domestic roles and called for men to participate more actively in family roles, most officers' wives took for granted that women were "primarily" responsible for the household. Familial and domestic work they performed was simultaneously regarded as "secondary" work and was not considered significant or remunerable" relative to work "outside the home. Men's association with the public arena was then paradoxically wielded to legitimise their privileged positioning within the home and the family.

Gendered support for the "natural" gender order gets underscored in officers' wives' interpretations of "feminism". The empirical chapters of this work underline how some officers' wives challenged the feminist movement for its "extremism" or "radical" tendencies (Dobrofsky and Batterson 1977). They cited "unappealing" and "objectionable practices", such as bra-burning, to rationalise their apprehension and critiqued "the rush to do too much too fast". A few women rejected feminist ideologies for their "putative and radical tendencies" — the idea that feminists reject the family and the notion of motherhood and adopt "hate and blame men" attitudes. Other officers' wives believed "gender equality has already been achieved" — pointing to increased female participation in the workforce, greater educational access, and more equal division of labour within households. They viewed feminism as "outdated" or "unnecessary", arguing that women are now "at par with men" and "no longer need to protest for rights". Most women supported feminist ideologies as long as they did

not challenge “men”, “deny women’s biological nature”, or threaten the institution of marriage and the family (p. 807, Ghosal 2005; Dobrofsky and Batterson 1977). These interpretations of feminism, shaped by their own privileged, upper-middle class backgrounds, were used as frameworks to dismiss the relevance of feminist thought in their lives and to rationalise their apprehension in supporting the “feminist cause” for “families like theirs”. More critically, while most officers’ wives upheld and reproduced gendered roles, hierarchies, and divisions, women did not perceive themselves as being “patriarchal” or “biased”. For example, women’s exclusion from “fighting units” was not perceived as a form of discrimination or inequality by most officers’ wives. Some officers’ wives deemed gendered roles for men and women to be “different” but “complementary” (and thus “equal”) and used this logic to negate gendered exclusions as prejudices (Krishnaraj 1996; Tickner 1995). Others identified as “pragmatic” women and accepted structural inequality as a normative feature of Indian society rooted in the conservative cultural backgrounds of the soldiers of the Indian Army.

The gendered control officers’ wives experienced through both the military and the familial order, their selective participation in paid labour, their support for women’s exclusion from combat, control of women’s sexuality and bodily autonomy, gendered familial hierarchies, and unequal division of labour were all placed by most officers’ wives outside the purview of “patriarchal control”. The inability to critique military practices, social norms, or familial dynamics and voice that critique in private spaces was understood as patriarchal control that needed feminist intervention and support.

Officers’ wives frequently emphasised their upper-middle class, educated family backgrounds and their association with the officer cadre of the Indian Army and identified as “cultured” women who had control over their decisions and choices. These self-descriptions were offered in comparison to an imagined category of “other” women: women positioned within the military apparatus as soldiers’ wives or those located in broader civil society or situated in rural India.

While many women insisted that the division between the soldiers' and officers’ wives had “narrowed” over time and acknowledged the change in the education levels of soldiers’ wives. As a collective group, soldiers’ wives of the Indian Army continued to be framed and imagined as “constrained”, “ignorant”, and “tradition-bound” – as women in need of welfare at the hands of officer’s wives. Similarly, women in broader civil society (in rural India) as “other” women were imagined and framed as belonging to lower socio-economic strata of society, possessing limited formal education, being subjected to strict familial norms, and controlling husbands. Patriarchal ideologies and control were primarily associated with these women, who were imagined to be unable to voice choice, critique, or make demands within private spaces of their homes or in their marital

relations. As a result, feminist thought was considered necessary only in relation to them and was supported to the extent that it involved their “empowerment”.

In doing so, officers’ wives, through symbolic boundary-making and self-identifications, distanced themselves from patriarchal “restrictive setups” and defended the irrelevance of feminist thought in their lives. They also draw on these self-representations to position themselves as “mentors” for soldiers’ wives who they, as welfare agents, could “help” them enhance their decision-making capacity and ability to voice their demands and concerns within the prevailing conservative familial and marital structure they are assumed to be subjected to. In these ways, most officers’ wives, through their gendered labour, upheld and reproduced the very class and rank hierarchies which they deemed to contest by providing welfare. Simultaneously and paradoxically, the “empowering initiatives” or opportunities provided through welfare and encouraged by officers’ wives were “directed” at providing soldiers’ wives with a “job”, a “hobby”, or “some vocations”. The objective, as many wives explained, was to provide soldiers’ wives “avenues” so that they could earn “some form of pocket money” or “a side income” and not be “so dependent on their husbands” for finances. Others explained welfare provided soldiers’ wives “opportunities” to learn different “practical and housekeeping skills” or “take part in vocational courses” — those they believed would help keep the soldiers’ wives “busy” when their soldier husbands were “away” or “not around”. The forms of empowerment officers’ wives supported and facilitated were deeply gendered and restricted, often framed around financial dependency, domestic skills, and keeping soldiers’ wives “occupied” in their husbands’ absence.

The construction and imagination of “other women” was also crucial to liberation and how it was experienced. Some women deemed themselves liberated because they had a choice, the capacity to make demands, and the ability to critique different military or socio-cultural practices and voice that critique within the private spaces of their homes and in their marital relations — an agency they believed other women did not have. Other officers’ wives believed they were liberated because they chose to be the way they wanted to be. Some emphasised their sense of liberation by detailing how they chose to act upon their voiced critique. Many invoked their identity as officers’ wives — linked to the Indian Army as a modern, secular institution — as evidence of their liberation. Others drew on education, class status, or upbringing to construct themselves as liberated women in contrast to an imagined, less empowered female population.

Agency as Choice

Like other military spouses in different geographical settings (Hyde 2015), officers' wives reflected on the role of the military wife, weighed perceived gains and losses, and evaluated the extent to which the Indian army (and society, through its norms and expectations) shaped their choices and decisions. However, a key finding of this study is that not all officers' wives felt the need to negotiate with the social, familial or military institutions. Some choose to support military structures without perceiving them as constraints; others, in response to experiencing military requirements as restrictive, choose to critique and distance themselves from the institution. Some women felt constrained by societal, familial, and institutional expectations and acknowledged having limited choice, not in an absolute sense, but in terms that their decisions were shaped not only by self-interest but also by family obligations and the constraints of military life. These limitations included restricted mobility due to frequent transfers, frustration over limited career options, the need to prioritise family responsibilities, and an inability to openly challenge military or social norms for fear of familial embarrassment, social isolation or halting their officer-husband's upward career mobility. Yet, even when articulating these constraints, these officers' wives insisted they still exercised choice, especially in a broader, more philosophical sense. They did not see themselves as lacking 'agency'; instead, they framed their lives as shaped by choices and decisions they made within certain limitations — their self-assessments of their abilities or familial responsibilities. This insistence on having choice, despite recognising structural constraints, reveals how expressions of agency were shaped by class hierarchies and tied to symbolic capital.

Some officers' wives leveraged their proximity to paid labour and civil society, as well as increased exposure to changing worldviews, to defend and rationalise their self-identified "modern" outlooks. They proudly narrated how their children encouraged them to embrace change or described how they "chose" to evolve their outlook with shifting worldviews, in contrast to their peers and friends of the same age, who, in their view, were "stuck" in outdated systems of thought. Other officers' wives chose to identify with conservative values — "belonging to the old school of thought" or "being traditional in some ways" were choices they made.

This study thus conceptualises gendered agency as choice — the capacity to act, decide, and make decisions (Shepherd 2010; Butalia 1993; Rao 2015). In other words, the respective "choices" officers' wives made or how they "chose" to engage with military and patriarchal power, whether through support, liminality, or critique, constituted expressions of gendered agency.

An officer's wife of the Indian Army summarised how choice was an expression of agency:

The army doesn't say 'do this' or 'do that'. It is the woman's perception… their interpretation... how they choose to look at the military requirements. There are two ways of looking at it – negative and positive.

The 'Other'

While previous studies have framed women's self-identifications as mechanisms to assert agency within the military apparatus, this research argues that self-identification functions as a means for women to articulate their choices (i.e., agency) and to differentiate themselves from other women in both military and civilian spaces.

Officer's wives wield their agency (choice) and draw upon various aspects of their identities and positioning within and beyond the military to self-identify and differentiate themselves individually from women in the larger military and social order.

For example, some leveraged their positive experiences within the military apparatus and mastery over their roles to assert their individual choice to invest labour in military life voluntarily. They used their loyalty to the military order as a mode of self-description. They drew on this logic to set themselves apart from women they perceived as "ungrateful" for prioritising self-interest over duty to family, husband, and the military.

Similarly, other officers' wives leveraged their participation in paid labour, exposure to civil society, and educational qualifications to assert their individual choices of critiquing military power and distancing themselves from military life. They used this self-representation to differentiate themselves from what they described as typical "army wives", women who, they believed, "enjoyed being housewives" and attending social events.

Choosing military responsibility and familial duty over professional aspirations was another path some officers' wives took, which they believed made them different from women they saw as having "unruly" children or being disconnected from their children's lives. They identified as devoted mothers and wives for whom family was a priority. In contrast, other women prioritised professional aspirations over military responsibilities, believing this set them apart from "average" army wives — women who, they believed, became mothers at young ages and centred their identities primarily around motherhood. Some officers' wives drew on both participation in paid labour and positive experiences within the military to assert their choice of "balancing both military responsibilities and personal-professional aspirations". They saw themselves as distinct from other officers' wives — those they deemed "overtly rank-conscious" or "too invested in their officer husband's career", as well as those they believed were "unable to understand military ethos".

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

Taking women's self-reflections as evidence, this study finds that officers' wives of the Indian Army are not default or unaware subjects of institutional socialisation. They are acutely aware of military norms and patriarchal structures and the pervasive ways in which these shape their lives. They critically and consciously interpret different practices and evaluate the degree to which the military institutions and social norms determine their capacity to make choices. Moreover, their complex engagement with power, acts of self-representation during interviews, their insistence on holding agency and being liberated, combined with their elite and privileged positioning within the military and broader Indian society, underscores a vantage point from which to understand gendered labour and power and how it upholds as well as critiques the durability and ubiquity of military and patriarchal power in public and private spaces.

Moreover, Indian Army officers' wives interviewed for this research perceived their distinct relationship with the military apparatus and the broader socio-cultural milieu they are a part of as expressions of their agency – choices.

Women framed their support for military and patriarchal power as an exercise of personal agency while simultaneously negating patriarchal and gendered military and socio-cultural expectations and practices as constraints or restrictions shaping their agency. In contrast, other officers' wives choose to actively critique military and social norms, distance themselves from the institutional apparatus and challenge patriarchal familial-marital practices in response to experiencing military requirements and social norms as restrictions that curtailed their choice and decision-making capacity.

Some officers' wives acknowledged that their choices were shaped by family obligations, institutional and cultural pressures, and the constraints of military life. Women described themselves as having limited choice, not in a complete or absolute sense, but in terms that their decisions were shaped not only by self-interest but also by the expectations of family and the military institution. Limitations were understood as an inability to openly challenge military or social norms due to fear of familial embarrassment, social isolation, or halting their officer-husband's upward career mobility. Yet, even when articulating these constraints, these officers' wives insisted they still exercised choice, especially in a broader, more philosophical sense. They did not see themselves as lacking agency; instead, they framed their lives as shaped by choices and decisions they made within certain limitations — their self-assessments of their abilities or familial responsibilities. This insistence that women had a choice despite recognising limits reveals how expressions and understandings of agency were relational —

shaped by class privilege, (assumed) educational background, familial upbringing and access to symbolic and social capital, defining what it meant to have — or lack — choice.

Institutionalisation and Socialisation

I have witnessed the everyday of military life and have been a part of the military setup. I was often puzzled by the celebrated status of military officers relative to that of their wives. In my imagination, the military wife was the permission-giver, the decision-maker, the knower, and the one who exercised control and wielded power. In most officers' wives' imaginations, these titles and wielding of power were often associated with the masculine relative to themselves. My socialisation, proximity, and positionality concerning the military apparatus made me intellectually curious about officers' wives, how they wielded power, and how often gendered wielding of power resulted in the privileged status of masculinity relative to that of the feminine.

Reflexivity guides the research hypothesis that social, individual, and gendered labour and support for institutionalisation play a central role in upholding military-patriarchal power.

This research stems from reflecting on my social-political labour, socialisation, and proximity to military-patriarchal power (Basham and Catignani 2018; Jacoby 2006). As Burke noted, "Seeing our own part in the perpetuation of patriarchy is an important first step in creating change" (p. 18, Burke 1993). This work, in this sense, is not a purely "academic" exercise "but an undertaking invested with responsibility and epistemic validity" (xviii, Kazi 2007). The research aims to "add value" in the "real world" and hold "utility beyond academia" (p.214, Catignani and Basham 2021).

The "demilitarisation of society" or the "chipping of patriarchy" (xv, Enloe 1988) necessitates the exploration of social or individual (gendered) labour and its potential to "privilege masculinities over femininities within militaries and society at large" (p.90, Eichler 2014). The military-patriarchal power model conceptualised in the scholarship can potentially serve as a tool[44] for individuals (such as myself) to reflect on their social labour and assess the spaces they occupy on or beyond the model, including their role in upholding military-patriarchal power (Basham and Catignani 2018; Basham 2022).

Moreover, this study, while acknowledging the role institutionalisation and socialisation play in constructing and maintaining gendered roles, identities, and power relations in socio-political-public

[44] Sylvia Walby has noted, "We need a set of theoretical tools to deal with the continuities" (such as the military and gender order) (p.230, Walby 1989).

spaces, also recognises the potential and space for personal agency within cultural-structural spaces (Soman 2009; Enloe 2014; Thapan 2001, 1995; Burke 1993; Dube 1988). The thesis has captured how officers' wives reflect and represent how gender systems of domination and subordination operate in social-familial and public-military spaces and reflect on their role and positioning within these structures. The motivation of this research is to complicate how we think about social, individual, and gendered labour and its potential in sustaining the patriarchal status quo (Enloe 2014; Basham and Catignani 2018; Basham 2022).

This study raises questions about the interplay between structural and individual change: can structural change shift individual perceptions of military personnel, or are structural shifts driven by changes in individual perspectives? For example, this research considers whether women's lack of support for the inclusion of women in combat roles hinders institutional change or if institutional change might shift women's attitudes toward combat inclusion. The study has exposed the critical role most women play in resisting and halting institutional change concerning gender equality in the military.

Who is this Research For?

By centring the contributions of Indian Army officers' wives, this research challenges their omission from discussions on militarisation, securitisation, and patriarchy. It underscores gendered labour and power have the potential and capacity to reproduce, uphold, critique and dismantle the durability and ubiquity of military and patriarchal power.

This study revisits the poignant question posed by Maria Zalewski (in Shepherd 2010): "How has it been so easy to leave women out?" and invites others to examine[45]: "Why have officers' wives been overlooked, ignored, or viewed as trivial?" Most officers' wives support the constructed patriarchal military and social order, associated gendered hierarchies, masculine-realist state-centric notions of security, public-private dichotomies, and state military objectives. If women uphold the gendered status quo, then how does gendered labour contribute to the invisibility of the military wife?

[45] The findings also necessitate further explorations about how the model can be exhaustively conceptualised to include other myriad forms of power, actors, practices, structures, or policies.

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Appendix I - Questionnaire

Some questions might be personal — feel free to refrain from answering any questions you don't feel absolutely comfortable answering.

- Name:
- Age:
- Rank:
- Branch/Corps:
- How long have you lived alone?

Family Background:

- Occupation of Parents (army/civilian background):
- How many siblings do you have? What is your relationship like with your siblings?
- Can you tell me about your education?

Personal Life:

- Did you have a favourite person growing up? For example, a family member, friend, teacher, celebrity, etc.
- What kind of media do you enjoy? Books/TV/movies/music/etc.
- Do you use social media? Are you aware of the *Me Too* movement?
- How do you like to spend your alone time?
- How do you perceive your own life? Do you have any dreams/aspirations you want to fulfil?
- What are the different roles you've played over the years? Are you happy with the role you've played?
- Do you see yourself as liberated in comparison to women and friends your age?
- How have you seen yourself change over the years? This might include changes in ideas, belief systems and thoughts.

Employment:

- What is your current occupation?
- How many years have you worked?
- How do you balance work and family life?

- Do you wish you had taken up another career choice?
- What does your husband make of your work? Does he respect you more for it?
- How do you spend your day/what does an ordinary day look like to you

Married Life:

- Why did you decide to marry an army man?
- How long have you been married?
- How did you meet your husband?
- What is your relationship like with your in-laws? Where do they stay? How often do you interact with them?
- How would you say the equation with your husband has changed over time?
- What are your expectations from a good marriage? How do you define what a good marriage is?
- Is there a division of domestic duties and household responsibilities in your home?
- Who has veto power in the house?
- Do you adhere to the notion of there being the man of the house?
- Do you think women are judged for being 'working women' in the army?

Relationship with Children

- Do you have any children?
- Did you want to have children?
- Did you stop working after you had children?
- What is the division of responsibility like when raising the kids? Did the father help during the early years?
- Can you tell me about the values/traditions/mannerisms you've taught your kids? Has it been different for boys and girls?
- What stories are the children told about their father being away?
- Have any of your children joined the army? Why/Why not?

Army Wife and the Indian Army

- Current place of residence
- How long have you lived here/in your current home?
- Where were you before this?

- How many times have you moved with your husband?
  How many years have you lived alone?

Role of the Military in the Country

- What do you make of the Indian Army? What do you think is the role of the army in the country?
- Do you know what your husband does? How do you perceive your husband's role?
- Have you been posted to conflict-ridden regions?
- Have you lived in Kashmir? How long for? What was your experience like?
- What do you make of Kashmir and its people?
- What do you understand of the Kashmir conflict?
- Why do you think Kashmir has gathered such a strong response?
- What is your take on allegations of human rights violations against the Indian Army?
- What is your take on AFSPA and the impunity associated with the act?
- How do you feel about the secrecy associated with the army?

General Interest in Politics

- What is your take on the BJP/RSS?
- Do you vote? When was the last time you voted?

Role of the Army Wife

- What do you think is the role of an army officer's wife?
- What is your take on the practice of grooming in the army?
- How do you feel about the practice of voluntary assessment? (ACR having a section, column for a pen picture or wives' contribution).
- What is your take on the AWWA, Ladies' Meet, etc? What do you make of these events?
- Are any restrictions imposed on you as the wife of an army officer?
- Do you think the army is a gendered organisation?
- What do you make of lady army officers? Do you think they are a hindrance or an asset?
- What are the perks you feel you get by being the wife of an army officer?
- What do you make of the sahayak culture in the army?
- What are three things you love about the Indian Army and three things you'd like to change?

- What do you think about the new generation coming into the army?
- How do you feel about women carrying ranks/husbands being called into office?
- How do you feel about the traditional divide in private-military spaces, also known as the India-Pakistan divide?
- Do you think it is possible to resist? Scope of resistance?

Your opinions on social-cultural topics:

- What is your take on live-in relationships and pre-marital sex?
- What do you think about masturbation?
- What do you think about abortion?
- How do you feel about cheating/infidelity?
- Do you know what the LGBTQ community is? What do you make of them?
- What do you think the role of religion is?
- Do you believe in astrology/pandits/etc?
- What do you think of the caste system? Do you believe in untouchability?
- Your take on inter-religious marriage
- How do you understand patriarchy?
    - Some of the patriarchal conventions you have upheld
    - Ways in which you feel you have challenged patriarchy
- How do you understand the notion of izzat?
- What is your take on feminism?

Please give me feedback.

Appendix II - Consent Form

Research Participant:

Full name			
Address			
		Postcode	
Telephone			
Email			

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken by UK institutions require that interviewees explicitly agree to be interviewed and how the information in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and agree to the conditions of your participation.

I don't anticipate any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time.

Interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publications or other academic outlets will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed.

By signing this form, you agree that:

- I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I can stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer any question.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to ask any questions about the study.
- The interview will be recorded, and a transcript will be produced (the transcript can be sent to me, and I will be given the opportunity to correct any factual errors).
- My identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview that may reveal my identity or the identity of the people I speak about.
- I don't expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially. A transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board (2022-2024)
- All or part of the content of your interview may be used in academic papers, policy papers or news articles.

I am happy to give my permission.

Signature: Date:

Data protection: The information you provide here will only be used to contact you about sharing your story in my work. I will not pass the details recorded on this form on to any other organisation without your permission. I will not store your data for any longer than the required period.