

Research Article

Uniform & Identity: Gender, Power, and Inclusion in Contemporary Armed Forces

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Abstract

The institution of the armed forces has historically embodied masculine ideals of discipline, strength, hierarchy, and national loyalty. However, the increasing inclusion of women and gender minorities in contemporary militaries has significantly transformed debates surrounding identity, power, and institutional culture. This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining Defence Studies and Sociology to examine how uniformed identities are constructed, contested, and redefined through gender inclusion policies. Using qualitative secondary research methods, the study analyses scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional reports to understand the structural and cultural dimensions of inclusion. The findings indicate that while formal integration has expanded, deep-rooted power hierarchies and gendered norms continue to influence military identity and operational culture. The paper argues that meaningful inclusion requires cultural transformation alongside policy reform.

Keywords: Military sociology, gender integration, defence institutions, power structures, uniform identity, inclusion.

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1. Introduction

The military uniform symbolizes authority, discipline, sacrifice, and national identity. Yet, behind this symbolic neutrality lies a historically gendered institution structured around masculine norms. Armed forces across the globe have traditionally functioned as male-dominated organizations, where combat roles and leadership positions were culturally and structurally reserved for men. In recent decades, however, global militaries including those of India, the United States, European nations, and developing democracies have initiated reforms to integrate women into combat roles and leadership positions. These reforms have triggered debates within defence institutions and sociological scholarship regarding identity, institutional power, operational effectiveness, and equality. This research paper examines how gender inclusion reshapes military identity and how power structures mediate this transformation. By integrating perspectives from Defence Studies and Sociology, the paper seeks to understand not only policy reforms but also the cultural and symbolic dimensions of change within contemporary armed forces.

2. Research Objective

In order to evaluate the wider sociological and strategic implications of inclusion and support interdisciplinary discourse between defence studies and sociology, it is necessary to critically examine how military identity has historically been constructed as gendered, examine current inclusion policies within armed forces, and investigate the relationships between gender, power, and institutional resistance.

3. Research Question

How has military identity been historically constructed through gendered frameworks, and in what ways do institutional mechanisms and power relations shape, facilitate, or resist the implementation of gender inclusion policies within armed forces, thereby influencing organizational culture, operational effectiveness, and the pursuit of substantive equality?

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design based exclusively on secondary data. Given the institutional sensitivity of military environments, secondary research allows systematic and ethical engagement with existing scholarly and policy materials.

4.2 Data Sources

The research draws upon:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles in military sociology and gender studies
- Defence policy reports and government publications
- International institutional reports (e.g., UN documents)
- Edited volumes on gender and military institutions
- Comparative case studies across nations
- Key academic works include Carreiras and Woodward (2017), Duncanson (2015), and Heinecken (2002), among others.

4.3 Analytical Framework

The present study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework integrating feminist institutional theory, military sociology, and critical power analysis. Feminist institutional theory is employed to examine how formal rules, informal norms, and organizational cultures structure gendered opportunities and constraints within military institutions. Insights from military sociology provide a structural and organizational lens to understand the armed forces as a distinct social institution shaped by hierarchy, discipline, cohesion, and historically masculinized norms. The analysis is further informed by Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power as relational, diffuse, and embedded within institutional practices rather than merely concentrated in hierarchical authority. This perspective enables an examination of how power circulates through everyday routines, disciplinary mechanisms, and regulatory frameworks to shape inclusion and exclusion processes. Additionally, the study draws upon R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to analyze how dominant constructions of masculinity become normalized within military culture, legitimizing particular leadership models, behavioural expectations, and definitions of combat readiness while marginalizing alternative gender identities. Methodologically, the study employs thematic analysis of secondary sources, including policy documents, scholarly literature, institutional reports, and relevant case studies. Through systematic coding and categorization, recurring themes were identified, including:

- (1) The construction of military identity,
 - (2) Institutional resistance to gender integration,
 - (3) patterns of representation and visibility,
 - (4) barriers to leadership and advancement,
 - and (5) processes of cultural transformation.
- This analytical approach enables a structured yet interpretive exploration of how gender, power, and institutional dynamics intersect within contemporary armed forces.

4.4 Limitations

Reliance on secondary data limits direct empirical observation.

Cultural contexts vary significantly across countries; findings are interpretative rather than universally generalizable.

5. Literature Review

Scholarship on gender and the military has expanded significantly over the past two decades. Carreiras and Woodward (2017) argue that militaries operate as gendered institutions where masculinity is institutionalized through recruitment, training, and promotion systems. Duncanson (2015) explores how inclusion policies often coexist with persistent masculine norms, producing what she calls “regendered militaries” rather than fully transformed institutions. Heineken (2002), in her study of South Africa, demonstrates that affirmative action policies alone cannot dismantle deep-seated institutional cultures. Similarly, UN reports on women in defence indicate that representation at entry levels does not translate proportionally into leadership roles. Recent research (Nicol et al., 2024) highlights the persistence of prejudice and implicit bias within military environments, affecting retention and career advancement. The literature consistently emphasizes that formal inclusion does not automatically guarantee substantive equality.

6. Conceptual Framework: Uniform, Identity, and Power

6.1 The Uniform as Symbol

The military uniform functions as a powerful institutional symbol. At a formal level, it represents unity, discipline, cohesion, and the subordination of individual identity to collective purpose. However, from a sociological perspective, the uniform also operates as a mechanism of normalization. It produces conformity by minimizing visible markers of difference whether related to gender, class, ethnicity, or individuality and thereby reinforces the ideal of institutional sameness. The assumption that uniformity produces neutrality is central to traditional military culture. Yet inclusion policies challenge the notion that neutrality automatically equates to equality. Sociologically, “neutral” standards often reflect historically masculine norms that have been naturalized as universal. Thus, the uniform becomes not only a symbol of collective identity but also a site where questions of difference, embodiment, and recognition are negotiated.

6.2 Gendered Identity Construction

Military identity has historically been constructed around attributes such as physical strength, aggression, endurance, risk-taking, and emotional restraint traits culturally coded as masculine within dominant gender frameworks. These norms have shaped recruitment standards, training regimes, evaluation criteria, and leadership expectations. Such constructions do not merely describe functional requirements; they institutionalize particular forms of embodiment and authority as ideal. Drawing on the concept of hegemonic masculinity, military culture has often positioned masculinity as synonymous with combat readiness and command capability, while femininity has been associated with support, care, or symbolic presence. As a result, inclusion policies must confront not only formal barriers but also deeply embedded identity narratives that define who is perceived as a “natural” soldier or leader.

6.3 Power and Institutional Resistance

Power within military institutions is formally hierarchical, structured through rank, command authority, and codified chains of responsibility. However, power also operates informally through everyday practices, social networks, and cultural expectations.

Institutional resistance to gender inclusion frequently emerges not through overt opposition, but through subtle and diffuse mechanisms such as:

- Informal professional networks that shape mentorship and advancement opportunities.
- Promotion practices that privilege traditionally masculine leadership styles.
- Persistent cultural stereotypes regarding physical capability, emotional resilience, or unit cohesion.
- Organizational narratives that equate combat readiness with masculinized ideals of toughness and homogeneity.

In this context, inclusion becomes a process of negotiation between formal equality frameworks and informal power structures embedded in institutional culture. The tension between policy reform and cultural continuity explains why transformation is often incremental and uneven.

7. Global Trends in Gender Inclusion

7.1 Expansion of Roles

Over the past decade, numerous armed forces have formally expanded women's access to combat and command positions. The United States has opened all combat roles to women, while India has progressively expanded permanent commission opportunities and command pathways. Similarly, Germany has integrated women across service branches, and Ukraine has witnessed accelerated integration amid ongoing conflict. These developments reflect both normative commitments to equality and pragmatic recognition of demographic, operational, and strategic realities.

7.2 Representation Gaps

Despite increased recruitment and policy reform, representation gaps persist across most national contexts. Women remain underrepresented in:

- Senior leadership and flag-rank positions.
- Elite combat units and special forces.
- Strategic command and high-level defence planning roles.
- The persistence of the "glass ceiling" indicates that formal access does not automatically translate into proportional representation or equal influence within institutional hierarchies.

7.3 Case-Based Observations

Comparative observations reveal distinct trajectories of inclusion. In Ukraine, integration has been accelerated by wartime necessity, expanding operational participation and reshaping public perceptions of women in combat. In India, judicial interventions have played a significant role in extending permanent commission opportunities and addressing discriminatory practices. Within NATO member states, gender mainstreaming has been embedded into peacekeeping doctrine, reflecting broader commitments to inclusive security frameworks.

8. Discussion

From a Defence Studies perspective, gender inclusion within the armed forces is increasingly associated with enhanced operational effectiveness. Diverse forces contribute to broader skill sets, improved decision-making, cultural intelligence in multinational environments, and greater legitimacy in peacekeeping and stabilization missions. Inclusion is therefore not only a normative commitment to equality but also a strategic asset in complex security contexts characterized by hybrid warfare, civilian-military



interaction, and globalized operations. From a sociological perspective, the military functions as a critical institutional arena in which gender norms, citizenship, authority, and national identity are actively negotiated. As a historically masculinized institution, it both reflects and reproduces broader societal power relations. While formal inclusion policies signify progress toward equality, institutional transformation remains uneven. In many cases, formal commitments to gender equality coexist with entrenched masculine organizational cultures. These dynamic produces what scholars describe as “dual structures” a condition in which formal equality is established at the policy level, but informal practices, norms, and networks continue to reproduce inequality in everyday institutional life.

Substantive transformation, therefore, requires more than policy reform. It necessitates structural and cultural change, including:

- The integration of gender-sensitive training that moves beyond symbolic compliance to address unconscious bias, institutional norms, and leadership culture.
- Transparent and merit-based promotion mechanisms to mitigate informal patronage networks and gendered gatekeeping practices.
- Clear leadership accountability frameworks to ensure that inclusion policies are implemented consistently across ranks and units.
- Long-term cultural change initiatives aimed at reshaping institutional narratives of military identity, professionalism, and authority.

10. Conclusion

The contemporary armed forces stand at a transformative crossroads. While uniforms symbolize unity and shared identity, they cannot erase the power structures embedded within military institutions. Gender inclusion has reshaped recruitment and policy frameworks, yet deeper cultural norms continue to shape institutional realities.

This interdisciplinary inquiry demonstrates that meaningful inclusion requires not only structural reform but also symbolic and cultural transformation. The armed forces of the future will reflect societal commitments to equality only if identity and power are critically examined alongside policy change.

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