



The silent ranks: An analysis of the emotional world of Indian army wives

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex emotional landscape of Indian Army wives, a group collectively known as the "Silent Ranks." Through a qualitative analysis grounded in phenomenological inquiry, this study explores the profound dichotomy between their public façade of stoic resilience and their private emotional struggles. The research identifies the unique socio-cultural and institutional factors—including the deployment cycle, frequent relocations, the culture of "izzat" (honour), and the insular cantonment life—that shape their emotional experiences. Findings reveal that their resilience is an active process of emotional labour involving the consistent suppression and management of fear, anxiety, and loneliness. This paper argues that the strength of the Silent Ranks, while admirable, often comes at a significant personal cost, necessitating a paradigm shift in institutional and societal support towards acknowledging and addressing their unseen psychological burdens.

Keywords: Emotional labour, silent ranks, resilience, deployment cycle, psychological burden

Introduction

The Indian Army is revered as a pillar of national security, its soldiers celebrated for their valour and sacrifice. Yet, behind every soldier stands a family providing unwavering support, often at great personal cost. Among them, the wives of Army personnel form a distinct community, colloquially and respectfully termed the "Silent Ranks." This nomenclature encapsulates the cultural expectation of stoicism, strength, and silent endurance imposed upon them. This research paper posits that the emotional experience of an Indian Army wife is a unique phenomenon, characterized by a constant negotiation between profound pride and intense personal struggle. Their reality is a world away from the occasionally glamorized portrayal in popular culture. It is instead defined by prolonged separations, the perpetual anxiety of a spouse in harm's way, the disruption of personal identity and career, and the immense pressure of upholding family and regimental "izzat" (honour). This study aims to dissect the emotional architecture of the Silent Ranks. It seeks to move beyond the archetype to answer a central question: What constitutes the emotional world of the Indian Army wife, and how do the structures of military life influence her expression and management of these emotions.

Literature Review & Conceptual Framework

1. The Global Context of Military Spousal Stress

Western scholarship has established a baseline understanding of military family stress. Key models include the emotional cycle of deployment (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001) [6], which outlines the psychological stages of pre-deployment, deployment, and reintegration. The work of Burrell, Adams, Durand, and Castro (2006) [2] further highlights the impact of frequent relocations on a spouse's career and social support networks. Furthermore, Figley's (1995) [3] concept of secondary traumatic stress provides a lens for understanding the anxiety borne by those connected to trauma-exposed personnel.

2. The Indian Specificity: A Unique Paradigm

The experience of the Indian Army wife is not merely a cultural variant but is shaped by a distinct set of factors. The Culture of *Izzat* (Honour) is a paramount currency. A wife's public conduct and emotional display are seen as a direct reflection of her husband's character and his unit's discipline. This heavily polices expressions of vulnerability.

- a. **The Joint Family Dynamic:** Often, the wife manages the household under the scrutiny of in-laws, adding layers of traditional expectation and complicating her autonomy during her husband's absence.
- b. **The Cantonment/Military Station Microcosm:** Life within a military cantonment is a double-edged sword. It provides a built-in community of understanding peers but also enforces a rigid social hierarchy and constant visibility, inhibiting genuine emotional expression for fear of judgment.
- c. **The Archetype of the "Fauji Bahu":** This ideal glorifies traits like silent sacrifice, unwavering strength, and self-effacement, creating a powerful social script from which deviation is difficult.

This study employs Arlie Hochschild's (1983) [4] concept of *emotional labour* — the process of managing one's feelings to create a publicly observable display, as a central framework for analyzing the experiences of the Silent Ranks.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to prioritize depth and capture the nuanced, lived experiences of the participants.

1. **Participants:** Twenty Indian Army wives were selected via purposive sampling. The cohort represented diversity in age (28-50), husband's rank (Captain to Colonel), and number of deployments experienced.

2. **Data Collection:** In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually. Questions were designed to explore experiences of separation, community pressure, personal ambition, and emotional management (e.g., "Can you describe a time you felt you had to hide your true feelings?").
3. **Data Analysis:** Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) ^[1] thematic analysis. This involved coding the data and identifying recurring patterns to develop key themes.
4. **Ethics:** Informed consent was obtained, anonymity was guaranteed through pseudonyms, and mental health resources were provided to all participants.

Findings and Analysis: The Pillars of Silence

Analysis of the interviews revealed four central themes that constitute the emotional core of the Silent Ranks.

1. **The Architecture of Anticipatory Anxiety.** Participants described a state of perpetual, low-grade dread rather than acute fear.
 - **Hyper-vigilance:** Constant monitoring of news channels and informal networks for any hint of trouble in their husband's area of operation.
 - **Management of "What Ifs":** Actively suppressing catastrophic thoughts to maintain daily functionality. As one participant, Priya (32), stated, "You allow the fear to visit, but you cannot let it move in. You acknowledge it and then quickly lock it away in a drawer to get on with your day."
2. **The Gendered Burden of Invisible Labour:** The role extends far beyond waiting; it involves immense, often solo, managerial and emotional labour.
 - **Sole Custodian of Hearth and Heart:** They become the primary decision-maker, financial manager, disciplinarian, and emotional anchor for children—all while performing calmness.
 - **The Sacrifice of Self:** Career aspirations are systematically dismantled by frequent moves (PCS), leading to a silent grief for a lost professional identity. Anjali (40) shared, "My own ambitions are the first casualty of every posting order. You mourn the person you could have been."
3. **The Cantonment/Military Station Paradox: Community in Isolation:** The very support system designed to sustain them can also be a source of profound loneliness.
 - **Performative Resilience:** Cantonment/Military Station life demands a constant performance of the "ideal officer's wife"—composed, capable, and never complaining. This performance is exhausting and isolating.
 - **Hierarchical Barriers:** The military hierarchy inhibit authentic connection. Confiding in the wife of a senior officer feels fraught with risk, as vulnerabilities may be misconstrued as a weakness in her husband.

4. **The Internal Conflict: Identity versus Duty:** A persistent internal struggle defines their emotional world.
 - **Negotiating the Self:** A constant tug-of-war exists between personal desires (the individual self) and the prescribed identity of the "fauji bahu" (the role self).
 - **The Containment of "Inappropriate" Emotions:** Emotions like anger, resentment, and profound sadness are deemed illegitimate and are suppressed or expressed only in absolute privacy, leading to internalized stress.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the "strength" of the Silent Ranks is not a passive trait but an active, daily practice of emotional labour. This labour is mandated by a tripartite system of pressure:

1. **The Institutional Structure:** The operational demands of the military (deployments, postings).
2. **The Socio-Cultural Web:** Expectations from the joint family and broader society regarding Indian womanhood.
3. **The Cantonment/Military Station Culture:** The unwritten rules of the military community that prize stoicism and performative well-being. The consistent use of expressive suppression, while effective in the short term, is linked to negative long-term psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms (John & Gross, 2004) ^[5]. The silence, therefore, has a cost.

Implications

The Indian Army wife is indeed a pillar of strength, but this pillar is forged through constant emotional management, silent sacrifice, and unacknowledged struggle. Their resilience is a testament to the human spirit but should not be an excuse for institutional or societal neglect.

1. **Institutional:** The Indian Armed Forces must proactively destigmatize mental health care. This includes integrating confidential counselling services into family welfare programs and creating official channels for spouse career support.
2. **Community:** Fostering more authentic, peer-led support networks within cantonments that allow for vulnerability without judgment.
3. **Academic:** Further research should focus on the experiences of wives of Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) and Other Ranks, whose socio-economic challenges may present different emotional landscapes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by giving voice to the Silent Ranks, this research advocates for a new paradigm—one that values their well-being not just as a component of military readiness, but as a rightful end in itself. A nation's debt to its soldiers is immense, but it is time to formally acknowledge the silent battle fought by the women who stand behind them.

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