

‘Care’ in Armed Forces in India: Recognizing it as ‘Service to the Nation’

Anamika Das and Ayatree Saha

Abstract

This paper attempts to understand the nature of care-work in the Indian armed forces. Global peacekeeping missions that include ‘compassion’, is distinct from the labor of caregiving in the everyday lives in the forces. This paper locates ‘care’ which is performed by men and women on an everyday basis, and equates its value as ‘service to the nation’. One of the authors’ experiential accounts as daughter of a person who has served in armed forces, along with a brief analysis of Hindi-language films capturing the theme of ‘service to nation’, have aided in investigating the nature of care work in the armed forces. We argue that care work in armed forces exists within a complex social milieu, alongside narratives created by the nation state that masks the very same labor.

Author Profiles

Anamika Das is a PhD research scholar at the University of Hyderabad, who is currently working on assessing redressal mechanisms for sexual violence in institutes of higher education in India. Her work involves sociology of law, feminist jurisprudence and gender studies.

Ayatree Saha is a PhD fellow at Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta who is currently working on sociality of sleep. Her work involves theories on care, labor, space, technology and body.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to locate *care* within the institution of the India military. Care, we argue is performed both by men and women within and around the Indian armed services, and there is need to recognize its value as 'service to the nation'. Care is historically and naturally designated as women's work (Lutz 2011). Men who perform caregiving services are rarely designated as care workers in the institution of the armed forces, because care work is understood as women's work and antithetical to the scope of a muscular organization like the Indian Armed Forces (IAF). The work performed by soldiers is rarely seen in terms of care, largely because of the institution's self-image as robust and epitomizing a masculine culture. The Paper looks at care work performed within this particular framing, and within an institution which is legitimized and valorized as producing and reproducing the nation state.

A caveat needs to be added as regards international peacekeeping deployment. Within the tasks of the armed forces, the values of care and compassion are considered necessary for deployment in international peacekeeping missions. Here the inclusion and valorization of the values of care and compassion is not only considered desirable but is also prioritized in accordance with the UN Peacekeeping Guidance especially for multi-dimensional assignments (UN Peacekeeping Guidance 2024). This is an exception in an otherwise largely unpaid and undervalued work of care provided on a day-to-day basis within the institutional structure of the military system. We argue that care-work in the armed forces is shared by both uniformed men of junior positions and women of the military system, within a complex social milieu, and camouflaged by narratives created by the nation state that make this labor invisible.¹ We argue that such care work should be recognized and incorporated within the currently highly gendered state building narrative of 'serving the nation'.

This Paper is inspired by the work of Cynthia Enloe, the architect of feminist analysis of gender and militarism, and in particular her exploration of how women's emotional and physical labor is used to support government policies on militarization, and the institution of the military (Enloe 2000). However, as she cautions, "In every country, the understandings of particular feminists

¹ The authors' constant use of the two genders, men and women, is based on the fact that only cis-hetmen are recruited in the forces and only cis-normative relationships are accepted.

about the conditions that make focusing on women in the military and engaging with the state from the inside as well as the outside, promising or frustrating or risky will vary—depending on the particular structure of the state (in law and in practice), the degree to which the popular culture is open to new ideas about gendered militarism, and the level of partisan regime cohesiveness” (Enloe 2000, 277).

To this end, we explore how the notion of ‘service to the nation’ can be understood in relation to understanding gender in the Indian armed forces. First, we introduce the military as an institution, along with its gendered representation in popular culture as exhibited in Hindi language cinema (since 1997). We argue that there is ambivalence about recognizing women’s capacity for ‘service to the nation’. We then focus on the core of the Paper - the analysis of the care-work performed within the forces by women and the *sahayaks* (jawans). The category of *sahayaks* in the military system further complicates the feminized concept of care. How deep the patriarchal mindset is entrenched is evidenced in the irony that men in the forces who serve as cooks, gardeners, drivers and perform care work for senior officers and their family members are regarded as ‘soldiers’ and ‘protectors’ of nation, especially in their own communities back home.

We draw upon written narratives of army wives in the Indian context, as well as one of the author’s own experiential accounts of growing up in the army cantonments. This has been supplemented by an analysis of representation on the official websites of the armed services. In addition, the Paper examines the representation of women in the military in Hindi-language cinema, that is, as a wife or a soldier, and her relationship with the ‘nation’. We argue that this relationship to the ‘nation’ is portrayed as unique and distinct from that of the male soldier. Further, there is a third category within the Army, the *sahayak* and their caregiving role in the institution. Together, these narratives paint a complicated picture of the idea of care, and its relationship with armed forces and nation.

The Armed Forces, Producing the ‘Nation’

The Indian Armed Forces (IAF) under the Ministry of Defence, comprises of the Indian Army, Indian Navy and Indian Air Force. The armed forces are one of the major tools of the State, which as the philosopher Louis Althusser argued, forms part of the ‘repressive state apparatus’ used to assert direct force (Althusser 2014). But that is not the only role performed by the institution of the armed forces. Associated with the image of the armed forces in popular culture, literature, films, and mass media, is the powerful rhetoric of the institution as the protector of the nation – defending the sovereignty of the State, securing national boundaries, conducting rescue operations during natural and man-made disasters, and above all keeping the citizens safe.

The term *soldier* or *jawan* is often used as a homogenous term, to describe service personnel in the armed organizations, the Indian Armed Forces and the Central Armed Police Forces, despite

the different roles of the defense and police forces and the thicket of terminologies based on rank. Historically, the prototype of the soldier or *jawan* is imagined as a masculine cis-het man who protects the nation and 'serves' the country. Encoded in the idea of *jawan* or soldier is serving the nation at the risk of one's life, and involves engaging with organized violence and death at all times. We argue that this uncertainty involving life threatening risk and violence is not limited to the lives of the personnel of the paramilitary or armed forces, but also affects the civilian others in their lives. They too live constantly with the risk of injury, death and violence. The women who are wives of these uniformed personnel, live in these uncertain spaces, not just with fear, but also with responsibilities. It is important to unpack the relationship between these women and the military system and the notion of 'nation'.

Women within Politico Military Eco-Space

Army Wives

In the context of the armed forces around the world, we often see men as patriots and naturalize the role of women in support of 'their' men. In a rare work on army wives, military reporter Tanya Biank (2007) wrote of instances of their passion and patriotism in the American military, exposing harsh conditions which negatively impact the personal lives of soldiers and their families, particularly highlighting their difficult nomadic life and the vulnerabilities of living in an environment where violence and risk are professional attributes. 'Army wives', as they are officially designated are not army personnel, yet they are integral to sustaining the social institution of the armed forces, and its operational war fighting task.

Within the Indian context, the writings of Pandey (2021) and Saxena (2023) are idealistic accounts of the challenges of military life and how women overcome them. In both these texts, including in situations involving a soldier's death, the wife's grief is shown to be intermingled with feelings of pride because her husband died for the nation. These authors present the pain of separated families and the difficulties involved, which reverberate with our own personal experiences as daughters of 'soldiers'. As narrated below, it is not just soldiers who go through intensive forms of socialization and training to accustom themselves to accepting and normalizing violence, army wives and the women of army families also have to constantly live with everyday violence. We argue, that this significant aspect which forms part of army wives' everyday lives, remains de-politicized and devalued.

Representation of Women in Armed Forces in Popular Culture

An analysis of some popular Hindi-language films based around military and war-based contexts shows an evolution in women's portrayals. Rarely are they represented as direct protectors of the nation. They may demonstrate agency in these films, at an individual level, but rarely are they portrayed as measuring up to their self-sacrificing male counterparts, who are understood as 'inherently' dedicated to protecting the nation's honor (Enloe 2020).

There is the classic portrayal of women as wives or girl-friends of soldiers, waiting and longing for their long absent husbands who are at the war front in films such as in *Border* (1997) and *LOC: Kargil* (2003). More recently, films such as *Fighter* (2024) represent the women figure in an agentive role, as a part of a gender integrated force, and even as protagonists in *Gunjan Saxena* (2020), featuring a feisty feminist fighter pilot. The screenplay, songs and other cinematic elements of these films combine to highlight the bravery and gallantry of the soldiers and their sacrifice, and the passive sacrifice of their families for the nation. In a departure from the usual hyper masculine war film genre, *Lakshya* (2004) features a male protagonist whose aimlessness in life is challenged by his girlfriend who motivates him to join the Indian Army. Once there, he is overwhelmed by the difficult conditions in the Army training institute and runs away. Disappointed at the protagonist's lack of resolve, his girlfriend ends the relationship. Pained at the loss, he is motivated to return and complete his training, and years later tests his courage in war. By then, his former girlfriend has become a feisty journalist and critic of violence and bloodletting in war. Their encounter takes place in an army canteen. The female lead is shown criticizing the violence of war and espousing an immediate ceasefire. A soldier who overhears, is provoked and rails at her ignorance, because soldiers, while they too hate the bloodshed, fight for the security and honor of the nation. The hero enters and calms the excited soldier, thereby shielding her from his colleague's anger. In the film, the female protagonist demonstrates greater self-will and agency, but nonetheless is shown as naïve and unaware of the patriotic duty of men who fight in the service of the nation.

More complex is the film *Raazi* (2018) centered on a female spy and based on a real-life intelligence (RAW) agent. *Sehmat*, demonstrates strength, courage, compassion and sensitivity over the human loss incurred in the fight between intelligence services of the conflicted states. She is motivated by the desire to fulfil her father's unfinished dream of serving the nation. He was a spy for India but now is terminally ill. After his death, she is groomed to become a spy as she fortuitously is located in Pakistan following her marriage into a loving and high-ranking Pakistani military family. In the course of events, she is responsible for the killing of the caretaker, her brother-in-law, and the inevitable death of her husband and father-in-law, once her betrayal is exposed. In the film's climax, she realizes that she is a pawn, and expendable. RAW intended to disown and eliminate her in the event of exposure. In the film's close, the disillusioned protagonist is bitter at being part of a system that devalues loss of innocent lives as 'collateral damage', celebrating it as 'victory'. When the film begins, it invokes values of patriotism and service to the nation, but ends with the female protagonist alienated by the machinations of the security forces and the inhumanity of state power.

With the biopic *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl* (2020), the female protagonist has graduated to being a uniformed service personnel in a masculine force resisting gender integration. The focus is on gender prejudices and the lack of gender sensitive facilities which inhibit and threaten to hold back the first woman flying officer in the Indian Air Force. Gunjan has been brought up by her

father in a gender-neutral way, as being no different than her brother. It is her father who encourages her to pursue her passion to fly and join the Air Force.

In this film, female officers are portrayed as incapable of demonstrating the kind of selfless patriotism as the male protagonists of earlier war films. In one scene Gunjan is shown confiding to her father her misgivings about joining the armed forces because she is unsure about her dedication to serve the nation, as (male) flying officers presumably naturally feel. When Gunjan eventually does participate heroically in the Kargil warfront, she is motivated by her father to fly for the love of flying, not out of duty to fulfill a national mission.

Fighter (2024) features a woman flying officer but in a supporting role to the 'Top Gun' male lead. The glamorous Minni is introduced as one of the best pilots in the force but her character is given minimal agency, beyond communicating the one-line message that women are capable of following their dreams. She wanted to be a pilot and despite her father's objection, she followed her ambition. In the process, her father disowns her. A reconciliation is affected through the agency of the male protagonist, who in a throw-away line states that she already is "married to the nation". Her father salutes her for becoming a squadron leader, but the scene invokes no affirmation of overall gender inclusivity in the forces.

Even in recent war-oriented films where patriotic sentiments are foregrounded, the logic for the inclusion of women figures (civilian and military) seems to be largely aesthetic, largely as loyal wives waiting and longing for absent husbands. Even when women are portrayed as active agents on the warfront, their roles rarely ever measure up to the blind and passionate commitment of the male soldier, the 'protector' of the nation.

Popular cinema, on occasion, has engaged with errant sexuality within the institution of the forces, especially as regards the issue of adultery in the armed forces in *Rustom* (2016). Based on a real-life incident of a naval officer who returns home to find that a 'brother officer has stolen the affections of his wife', he murders her lover. The more complex issues of sexuality within a gender integrated army have yet to be explored in Hindi cinema, although it figures prominently in popular discourse. This became visible following the Supreme Court of India 2018 ruling decriminalizing adultery in marital relationships. The Indian defense establishment insisted on an exception being made for the armed forces as it would threaten the sacred value of 'brotherhood' among soldiers. Defense officials argued that a sentiment of 'brotherhood' was necessary for maintaining the cohesiveness and unity that soldiers must show in times of war.

However, in view of the movement towards a gender integrated force and the social churning towards complex inter-personal relationships, the military system is being challenged to develop a more nuanced policy. For instance, in 2016, a young officer in the Air Force was given a mere 'release' from service following an affair with a fellow officer's wife, who was serving as squadron

leader in the Air Force. The Armed Forces Tribunal stopped short of severely penalizing him by 'dismissal' from service as was the conventional practice. The Tribunal explained that owing to the dynamic nature of new social relationships that are a consequence of today's age and time, the parties involved in such relationships cannot be absolutely banned (Gupta 2020). The woman Squadron Leader was not meted out any punishment. This is in contrast to the elaborate social codes of conduct relating to the behavior of 'army wives' and especially the control over their sexuality in the military system.

Locating Care in the World of Camp and Cantonment

Caring or care-work has been discussed within academia for more than five decades (Abel & Nelson 1990). The issues that care-work brings to the fore are those of labor, and of specific forms of labor intersected with gender, race, ethnicity, class and economy. It also brings into prominence questions of morality, ethics and personal relationships (Mason 1996) as Care is defined as "the activity of attending to others and responding to their emotions and needs" (Coltrane & Galt, 2000, 16). It involves sensitivity to physical, emotional as well as social needs. Jennifer Mason (1996) conceptualizes care as both a sentient activity and an active sensibility by bringing together the debates on care as love and care as labor in an effort to blur these distinct dichotomies. Care is "provision of personal services to meet basic physical and mental needs that allow a person to function at a socially determined acceptable level of capability, comfort, and safety" (Himmelweit and Plomien 2014, 2).

The historical expectation of associating caregiving duties with women has contributed to the feminization of care work, reinforcing the association of caregiving with femininity and therefore the undervaluation of care work (Meyer 2000). Care has economic properties, which then reverberate into social and cultural contexts (Himmelweit and Plomien 2014). Unpaid care continues to maintain the nation whereas the commodification of care has led to expensive care provision and its own pitfalls.

The state does little to distribute care-work. However, communities are seen performing care with members taking care not just of their own children but also those of their neighbors. The network that is created where people take care of each other is crucial for social reproduction (Fudge 2014). The labor performed by care providers often is expected to be free, and those who perform paid care-work are paid a pittance.

What happens when care-work is performed by uniformed soldiers? What about the care roles performed by wives, widows and mothers of soldiers, and other vocation-based employees such as teachers and a host of domestic staff? The Paper examines the relationship of the institution with those women who perform care-work for soldiers at home as their 'wives' - a category which is formally recognized by the forces. Moreover, it looks at particular forms of care-work which

although gendered, is performed in distinctive ways by men within the context of the institution of armed forces.

What we intend to bring out is how care-work, both paid and unpaid, performed within the institution, is not only visible in gendered forms but also perceived in specific ways. Particularly useful as an analytical entry point is Alexandra Hyde's exploration in *Inhabiting No Man's Land: The Military Mobilities of Army Wives* (2015), of the construction of the narrative of the soldier father's absence. For example, a familiar trope in Hindi-language movies is the constantly absent 'father', the 'soldier'. Heroic stories of the father are repeatedly narrated to the child. In a patriarchal society, social acceptability of absence of the father figure is embedded in gendered structures of father going away for 'work' and 'mother' staying home to take care of the children. In the context of the forces, we often hear the phrase that 'we are able to sleep peacefully at night, because these men guard us. The messianic figure that a father becomes in this valorized process of protecting 'us' from the 'terrors' of the world, is deeply political and problematic. What for instance happens to families in the absence of these heroic fathers. Hyde does not quite define care, but posits how the soldier's own children are deprived of the father's care, which in turn is provided to others' children: the care to enable them to be safe, to sleep. Logically, this would suggest that the narrative of men fighting on the borders, or staying away to fight for the nation and allowing others to 'sleep', that is to be safe, involves performing an act of care?

We argue that calling this an act of care, would mean succumbing to the nation state narrative of ranking the valor and sacrifice involved in the nature of care-work provided by a masculine care-giver as hierarchically superior. It begs the question, what exactly does the soldier do, that is so exceptionally different from what the mother does, or what any other (non-muscular) caregiver does, that lets us sleep peacefully? Also, as Saha (2022) argued, letting people sleep is an act of care, which should be accessible to care providers as well as receivers.

It is constantly iterated in different societies, how fathers cannot stay home and need to work, to feed us. The father figure is that of a provider of money, and thereby food, housing and status. Who does the rest? Care providers are rarely looked upon as workers, which makes their labor go unnoticed and undervalued. Feminists have long fought to bring into prominence the work that women do in the households (Bhattacharya 2014; Ray 2019). What happens when both spouses enter the formal paid labor market? The gap in care is then outsourced and performed by women from marginalized communities (Fraser 2014). In India, this form of labor is performed mostly by Dalit and tribal women, who get paid to perform care duties (Bhattacharya 2000). This leaves those in the homes of care-workers without care provision.

Army Wives as Personalized Caregivers

Army Wives, in most cases perform effectively the role of a female head of household (as was the experience of both authors, who are daughters of officers in the armed forces). Filtered through memory, one of the authors in particular, draws upon her mother's experiences as an 'Army Wife' and her role as a caregiver to her army officer husband, located across multiple cantonment areas. Her mother was an ardent worker in the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA) through most of her young married life. The official webpages of AWWA associations are replete with their forthcoming activities. In the websites of these associations run by the wives of the Indian Army (awwa.org.in) as well as the Air Force (indianairforce.nic.in/afwwa) respectively, the wives of personnel are referred to as *veer naaris* (brave women) and *sashakt sanghinis* (strong companions). *Sashakt Sanghinis* is both descriptive of the women as well as the name of a project under the Association, which works towards developing vocational skills among women. Generally, the wives of senior officers and sometimes the wives of service personnel below officer-rank are active in the institution.

Recalling the time when her father was serving in a non-family posting, one of the authors describes her mother being in-charge of activities such as classes for embroidery, candle making, card making and tailoring. Such exposure enabled self-sufficiency through acquisition of skillsets and enhanced qualifications for paid jobs. Later computer classes, driving and etiquette training were added. Under these welfare activities, subsidized hostels were built for dependents of IAF personnel for completion of their secondary education. A significant activity of the AWWA and its branches was to facilitate student scholarships.

One of the primary activities of these associations was to provide care work, including education and social assistance to the widows of soldiers who had lost their lives while on-duty, and the wives of those disabled in service. War widows were given assistance with grief counselling and encouraged to participate in social activities so that they did not feel alone. In addition, Project 'Asha' was run as a school in which children with disabilities were taught to be self-reliant and disciplined. On occasions such as birthdays and wedding anniversaries of officers or their families, handmade cards by children at Asha were gifted as a present. Wives of senior officials would regularly visit the associations to check records and log books of AWWA activities and to rank which regimental unit or division had done the most amount of work and in which area.

One of the main activities which the wives were mandated to engage in was to convene (and perform at) cultural events and manage gift-giving ceremonies on the occasion of visits of wives of senior officers. When officers hold significant positions of command at the regimental level, their wives would spend inordinate amounts of time choosing suitable gifts for the wives of senior officials. The wives of junior officials would conduct research into the visiting senior's wife, inquiring about her previous visit to regimental units to determine her tastes and preferences.

Although army wives were full time homemakers, they spent weeks at these tasks giving the impression that they were working employees of AWWA. There were instances when the children, would have to stay back at their fathers' offices in the regiment, while the mothers were busy in these activities. Army wives working outside the home at the time (when the author referred to above was growing up), worked only as teachers in the IAF or in government funded and private schools so as to adjust with their husbands' transferable jobs.

When asked about what induced them to spend hours in these activities, as they never paid, one of the wives had an intriguing response². She spoke of how the welfare work gives her a sense of identity, and therefore joy. Alongside, she would narrate anecdotes of how army wives' involvement in such welfare activities would translate into better chances of their husband's promotion. The incentives driving these time-consuming welfare activities was not only the wives gaining a sense of identity, but also securing their husband's identities and status. These activities can be understood as laboring to maintain the status of a wife who is part of a social milieu because of her spouse. This directly translates into women playing supportive role within the military institution. Maintaining regularity in these activities, and conducting an impressive welcome program upon the visit of wives of senior officials often coincided with promotion in the rank of the soldiers. On occasion, a conflict between wives could influence transfers, reprimands, and an average ACR (Annual Confidential Report) file for their husbands. The identity of an army wife was in tandem with that of her husband.

Under the umbrella of activities for self- improvement were socialization classes for acquiring skill sets like 'table and dining manners' and 'personality development'. Newly recruited junior officers were familiarized with British style table manners at their institutes of training, a necessary adjunct in the process of 'becoming an officer'. Officers get reprimanded for making too much sound with their spoon or mouth while eating during official parties. Familiarity and ease with a way of eating and rules pertaining to usage of a system of crockery and meal courses is important in the services. Imparting such manners to wives of junior officers as a matter of 'welfare activity' performed by senior officers' wives is akin to a program to 'civilize'. The fact that the log record of such activities would be shown to the wife of the inspecting senior official demonstrates the significance of such activities for the status of the wives.

It is likely that the social environment has undergone significant change with the present generation of Army wives since many of them possess degrees in higher education, including post-graduate and professional degrees. This might account for the legal opposition of army wives to the Army's efforts to introduce training activities around a proposed social code of conduct. In 2020, the Indian Army prepared the concept of a training module for 'spouses of officers' to equip them to adapt to the changing social environment in the institution (Chhina 2020). Eventually the

² This section draws on the conversation one of the authors had with her mother who was married to an Army officer.

concept note was buried in the face of severe criticism from army wives, arguably for reasons of the additional work burden it would entail.

Lawyers associated with the legal case were quoted in media reports as indicating that the training was meant to reduce incompatibility between wives of different generations in the organization, so that social cohesion and harmony was maintained (Chhina 2020). The training was designed to make officers' wives "imbibe core values of the organization" along with instilling "leadership" qualities by "upgrading" them to be an "Enabler". This involved women "building teams and delegating responsibilities" that would be effective for the organization, and involved "audit performance and transparency establishment". New competencies were to be developed such as sensitivity to "psychological nuances" to enable better management of distress situations. Alongside would be acquisition of legal and financial knowledge that would be helpful in dealing with marital conflicts within the institution. Additionally, AWWA would be oriented to act as a tool for the government's welfare activities by "linking AWWA to Government of India schemes". With the entry of a younger generation of well-educated army spouses, such additional training was considered unnecessary, the lawyers argued (Chhina 2020).

This experiential account portrays the range of care work that women did as part of the institution. This care-work was not paid, but socially recognized and necessary for the maintenance of one's position within the organizational dynamic. Maintaining a good relationship with wives of senior rank officers, often became a crucial part of survival in the regiment. We argue that since so much of the women's time was spent on activities which indirectly constitute the performance of care-work, the women involved became in the process, an intrinsic part of the life of the institution of the Armed Forces. Here, care involved not only the affective labor of looking after the family, but included an institutionally mandated range of activities that involved attending to others and their needs.

However, the time spent by women in welfare activities, inevitably took away time from their own domestic chores or child-care. Who performed these care duties? When young army officers had children, economically it was not feasible for the family to hire domestic staff to assist in household chores. Often the fallback option of a 'helping hand' was the young soldier who was attached as a 'batman' (battle man) to run errands for the officer in the Indian Army. This is a tradition singular to the Army branch of the armed services in India.

***Sahayak* – The Soldier as Care worker**

The role of the *batman* or *sahayak* is a legacy of the colonial period. The *jawan* as *sahayak* functions as an aide to an officer in the Indian Armed Forces. The Indian Army has retained the colonial practice while the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force, lacking the requisite manpower, never had a tradition of *sahayaks*. Curiously, in the drive to right size the Indian Army, the role of

the *sahayak* was retained despite the increasing controversy surrounding the position over the last couple of decades. In 2017 a rash of social media uploads by soldiers revived the intermittent controversy over the exploitative legacy of the *sahayak* system. Soldiers on social media posts had expressed distress over the kind of work they were asked to perform for the officer rung of soldiers, including polishing their shoes.

Explaining the rationale for retaining the role, the then Chief of Army Staff Gen. Bipin Rawat stated that the Army provides a young soldier aide to an officer as a matter of its 'buddy tradition' which emphasizes co-dependence of soldiers on the warfront (Singh 2017). The buddy is commonly referred to as the '*sahayak*' (helper). Giving an account of the duties mandated to *sahayaks* by Army Order, General Rawat detailed - provision of "protection and security", "delivering messages during operations", "maintaining every equipment and elements of the officer" like weapons and uniforms and in general providing assistance in everyday activities as well as during war. This includes assistance in "digging trenches and shelters", "training or exercise". During "patrols and independent missions" they can be involved in such minutiae of work like operating radio sets, maintaining maps or any other equipment, and are expected to be on call at any point of time. This is in contrast to the officer's role in planning, coordinating and executing operations" (Singh 2017).

As can be seen from the above description, the duties of the *sahayak* are limited to support and care on the warfront and on Missions, and not in running the officers' personal errands during peace time. This issue was taken up in the parliament in 2008, when this system of 'soldier servants' came under severe criticism because of the problem of soldiers being made to perform a set of duties which did not fall under their profile of work (Bedi 2022). These included readying the officer's uniform and boot polishing, taking dependents to playgrounds and parks, cycling them to school and for tuitions, cooking for the officer, and other domestic chores of dusting the house and ironing clothes. Also, neither the officer nor the military system is paying him for the extra hours and additional duties he is performing.

The care-work that the *sahayak* provides to the officer and his dependents has different assumptions attached to it than that of the care work of the 'wives' discussed above. The rationale for the performance of the *sahayak's* care-work rests on this buddy system, which is seen as serving the officers. Baldly speaking, the buddy system exploits individuals who are overworked, underpaid and perform work that is justified in the name of loyalty. Nonetheless, in an indirect way, this precise unwritten mandate and action makes a *sahayak* in serving the officer, serve the nation. Without the care-work performed by the *sahayak* within the institution, the maintenance and production of every other element would be undermined.

As Enloe's writings demonstrate the unpaid care-work of both male soldiers and IAF wives sustains the war-fighting system (Enloe 2000). However, there is need to demarcate the distinct

kind of care-work performed by the two groups, the army wives and the *sahayaks*. Here we need to broaden our understanding of what care-work means. Officers' wives also depend on the *sahayak* for many errands including taking care of children and bringing in groceries. Logically, it can be said that both the wife and the *sahayak* share responsibilities and duties of the household of the soldier. Whereas the soldier is ordered by the former to perform care-work as a matter of power dynamics as well as loyalty, the wife's care work though not free from relations of power within the family, is the result of affection and socialization. Also, it is through their care-work that service wives navigate the military organization.

Their role is to be good wives and nurturers and, in this manner, serve the nation-state. The higher position of officers' wives in the organizational hierarchy further mediates their roles, for instance in the civilizing of the wives of soldiers in the lower rungs, as well as letting the *sahayaks* run small, unimportant errands for them, which they cannot refuse. Both though, are serving the nation – one by embodying it as a nurturer, and taking care of her soldier husband and the wives of the *jawans*, and the other in his capacity as a soldier who is also a protector of the land. Both ultimately, are performing care labor for the maintenance of the organization.

While the labor of men and women mentioned above contributes in terms of care, the nation-state's narrative is gendered in that it invisibilizes care work and care-workers and reproduces organizational hierarchies and norms, for the benefit of those who are positioned in the senior most rungs of the organization.

Conclusion

This paper captures care-work, through the lives of men and women in the social system of IAF. The idea was to locate care-work within an institution that works in the production of nation state, and in the process to destabilize the way we usually grasp the concept of care and care-work. The organization's specific context of militarized masculinity does not recognize care-work, and indeed invisibilizes it. Militarized masculinity of the institution presents a front that disassociates itself from anything to do with care. This enabled us to critically examine the way care-work is practiced and understood within and around the institution.

The kind of care-work performed by the women, whose identity is around their social status as wives of army personnel, involved myriad activities that usually are not conceptualized as care. With the professionalization of caregiving activities, there has been a significant shift in how we look at care. Care is not analyzed as confined to certain kinds of tasks like child rearing, but something that involves significant everyday tasks that support the system. Here, the women, or the wives of army officials perform care-work which is officially obligated, but is practiced under the guise of volunteering or duty. In this context, the idea of duty encompasses not just a duty to maintain household or social status, but duty to serves the nation. The usual association of women

with 'nurture' is translated into socially prescribed roles that are performed within everyday acts. Here, the bodies of women are inscribed with the duty to serve the nation through care-work. The nurturer self in the woman is extended from the body to the institution through family and welfare activities obligated by the institution itself.

Men on the other hand perform care-work that is distinct from that of the women. Since care is usually not expected from men, their bodies are inscribed with performing tasks like protection. The *sahayaks* actualize a different form of care. But both forms of care-work performed are invisibilized, unacknowledged, unpaid and undervalued. Yet their care-work maintains the institution that is a tool of the nation-state.

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