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Recruiting More Women: Broadening SAF's Inclusive Policy

By Fitriani Bintang Timur

Synopsis

The SAF aspires to have more women as career soldiers to tackle the shrinking pool of male recruits. Singapore needs to build the policy infrastructure for women to be fully integrated in the SAF.

Commentary

SINGAPORE HAS clear examples of embracing diversity in its armed forces. It has gradually built generations of multi-racial troops since the early days of nation building. Currently, the country has broadened its policy of inclusivity to recruit more women as the number of males is forecast to decline nearly 29 percent (from 21,000 to 15,000 recruits) due to Singapore's declining birth rate. Despite not having any female general to date, the forces have voiced support for women to "go the distance".

One good example is Gan Siow Huang, the first female colonel in the Republic of Singapore Air Force who was promoted in 2010 with experience in drafting policies and commanding RSAF 203 Squadron, as well as the Air Surveillance and Control Group. Singapore's National Day Parade (NDP) in 2011 proudly brought the first female combatant to reach the rank of Master Warrant Officer, Jennifer Tan, as the first female regimental sergeant-major on stage. This year's NDP arena will witness the first woman parachutist, 3rd Warrant Officer Shirley Ng, in Singapore's 48 year national history.

More than being inclusive

Singapore introduced the SAF Merit Scholarship for women in 1997. The scholarship provides support for outstanding women, with strong leadership qualities, who passed basic military and officer trainings, to gain overseas undergraduate studies. They take up SAF senior command and management positions upon their return. Col Gan was one of its best graduates.

The SAF recruited its first female combatants in 1986, allowing them to serve as artillery gunners, pilots and intelligence analysts. In 2004, Singapore began to assign women as mortar platoon leaders in infantry units. Singapore's achievement in allowing women into combat roles has been praised by Jennifer Mathers, an American expert on women in the military, for being ahead of the United States. The US had fierce debates on whether women can enter combat roles until early 2013 when they decided to drop barriers for women to access all military roles. However, Mathers noted that most women in SAF are still confined primarily in support roles with few managing to attain senior command positions.

Challenges for women in military

It is difficult for women to be in the armed forces. They gain more visibility as a minority in a masculine institution. Thus they are required to perform even better than their male peers to avoid being labelled as “poster women” or tokens. Cynicism meets both the women enrolling into SAF and the institution’s sincere intention to improve the country’s defence posture, thus creating a barrier for women to be fully integrated.

The instant-integrationist approach also has side effects in that the male majority envy the minority getting limelight and leniency. Nevertheless, Singapore is known for its merit-based society and has performed well in keeping its heterogeneous society together. Surely this challenge of replenishing its human resources with the best persons for these military roles, whether men or women, will be tackled with similar attitude.

Within the security sector globally, the critical mass of 30 percent minority representation, adopted at the United Nations 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995, has been difficult to attain. Even the UN Peacekeeping Operations (UN PKO) keep their modest goal of female police peacekeepers at 20 percent by 2014. This goal seems far away because by March 2013 women police force comprised less than 10 percent while women military forces stood at only three percent - and this after mainstreaming efforts were done to raise the number from one percent in the 1990s.

The UN PKO has acknowledged that they face difficulties to meet quota goals for women peacekeepers because there is a gap in data and analysis about women participation in national security institutions globally, as well as the existing social biases that perpetuate gender inequality within the security sector.

Still the UN PKO stresses the important roles of female peacekeepers to act as role models, inspire women and girls, address specific needs of female ex-combatants and survivors of gender-based violence, mentor female cadets in military and police academies, as well as interact in societies where women are prohibited from speaking to men.

One country that encounters similar problems in recruiting and retaining more women in its armed forces is Norway. The country’s goal is 25 percent female armed forces by 2025 where last year it was at 12.4 percent. The Norwegian Defence Department identified three reasons for this. First, Norwegian women viewed military as a launch pad to other careers. Second, they perceived family relationships as a priority. Third, they felt that the military has an exclusionary culture that is male-dominated and hard to break. Yet, acknowledging these weaknesses and keeping the commitment are good ways to plough ahead. In 2012, Norway was the only UN member state that promoted a senior female candidate for the leadership position of force commander in UN PKO military component.

Action for integration

As a top-down organisation, leadership is important in the national armed forces, including Singapore’s. Thus, any reform should be supported by leaders’ commitment and this is particularly crucial for integrating women into the forces. Therefore the first strategic action needed is for the military top brass to demonstrate their confidence in women’s ability to take on military roles both in a public setting as well as within military training. This attitude will induce open-mindedness and remove the image that SAF recruits only a token few, but instead is committed to both genders being equally respected.

Secondly, a strategic plan is required to better recruit and retain women personnel. Gender-sensitive and specific force generation strategy to promote gender equality is needed as it will better address the underlying issues that cause women to have reservation about entering SAF. Creating female military personnel role models, establishing gender-coaching programmes, conducting outreach initiatives and having gender advisers are some of the policies that can be implemented. Last but not least, research also plays an important role as the study of social norms and equality engineering will also be required.

When all the foundation works are complete, Singapore will be in better position to reach its goal of 10 percent women career soldiers who can then be pushed to their maximum potential. So far, good marks have been attained. Greater female contribution to the SAF will help make the future look better for all Singaporeans.

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