

Forsaking Careers to Follow: Trailing Military Spouses in India and Implications for Employment

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ABSTRACT

Military families undergo frequent inter-state relocations between duty postings, resulting in disrupted career continuity for the accompanying non-service spouse. Termed “trailing spouses”, these partners endure stalled progression prospects, skills under-utilization, earning gaps and chronic underemployment. This article examines the trailing spouse dynamic in the context of Indian military families and its detrimental implications for spousal employment outcomes. Surveys reveal most Indian military spouses sacrifice personal career aspirations to support their partner’s mobile military service. The hardships of securing portable, fulfilling work near isolated postings leaves many struggling with identity issues and mental health stress. Beyond economic costs, unmet expectations coupled with reoccurring loss of professional status risks resentment that lowers motivation for the service member’s continued military tenure. With women comprising over 90% of Indian military spouses, lack of supportive policies also represent failure to address gender inequality and labor market barriers facing educated, skilled wives willing to contribute to national productivity. Though India lacks aggregate data, global research quantifies how military life limitations substantially handicap spousal earnings and advancement. This carries over into retirement hardships post-service. Creating customized interventions - spouse preferential hiring programs, transport access, vocational reskilling attuned to remote base job landscapes, subsidized childcare, telecommuting options, and cross-state certification portability can help empower families sustain career continuity across frequent relocations. Holistic reforms focused on military spouse employment can uplift national security, gender parity and collective economic progress.

Keywords: *Trailing spouse; military families; career continuity; under employment; retention*

INTRODUCTION

For Indian military families, frequent inter-state transfers between isolated cantonments and remote outposts is a reality intrinsic to service life. The soldier’s call of duty causes major mobility demands and separations that deeply impact the home front. Wives who accompany and support soldier-husbands during harsh field tenures often sacrifice personal aspirations for collective welfare. Despite education or talent, this “tying effect” of a spouse who trails their partner’s military postings severely obstructs career continuity. Termed “trailing spouses”, they endure stalled progression prospects, skill under-utilization, earning gaps and chronic underemployment. However, meaningful careers provide not just crucial income but also networks and purpose for partners lacking wider family support at relocations.

This research article aims to explore the trailing spouse phenomenon through the lived experiences of Indian military wives. It explains how structures of military service imposed upon families hamper employability and advancement for qualified women. Beyond career disruptions and social isolation, perpetual starting over risks strained marriages and reluctance towards prolonged commitments. Facilitating flexible employment avenues can sustain spouse skills, uphold gender equality and support national security. Global data affirms how fulfilling work opportunities focused on military families can have strategic impacts on retention, readiness and unlocking national talent pools currently constrained in ‘tying mobility’.

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The All-Consuming World of Trailing Military Spouses

The peculiarities of military service entail frequent outstation transfers and remote field postings to forward areas for months at a stretch. Consequently military families experience high residential relocations between states and sudden disruptions from emergency deployments. A US Department of Defence survey estimates around 70% of military spouses quit jobs at some point to accompany a partner's posting transfer (DoD, 2019). This relentless career instability exacts steep opportunity costs, advancement inhibitions and skill deterioration among the trailing military spouse.

Indian military sociology literature first studied this dynamic among army wives contending with recurrent base transfers and separations from soldier-husbands by Lama Rewal (2009). She deployed an ecosystemic model probing the multilevel adjustments - personal, inter-personal, positional and contextual - demanded of spouses tied to the Olive Greens. Subsequent research highlights the dominance of interrupted careers, identity struggles, social isolation and mental health issues tied to military spouse mobility [1]

Military spouses surveyed consistently report more career compromises, barriers and dissatisfaction compared to civilian counterparts [6]. Blue Star Families (2020) longitudinal surveys across over 5000 US military families echo this sentiment - over 75% of spouses believe military life advancement obstacles have worsened over the years despite supportive speech-making.

Academic studies focused on the Indian context remain conspicuously lacking, though media accounts underscore similar sentiments locally. As an army wife described in a case study chronicling her journey across varied cantonments, frequent dislocation exacts real costs on relationships, child development, spousal employability and family savings[10]. Some 68% of military wives surveyed felt unable to pursue a career due to disrupted continuity from periodic relocations between bases (AWWA Journal, 2018). Financial instability tied to long career gaps also contributes to hesitation towards continued military tenure among personnel conscious of familial sacrifices[5]. This sentiment mirrors US evidence suggesting military spouses are twice as likely to encourage service members to leave the forces due to unhappiness over career prospects compared to civilian wives[6].

The Struggles of Underemployed Trailing Spouses

A majority of military spouses worldwide report being underemployed - stuck in jobs below their skill levels and qualifications. Among US military families, over 53% of spouses describe being overqualified for current roles, with 50% asserting their education and expertise goes unused on the job[3]. Australian defence surveys similarly indicate over 60% of military partners are underemployed (DHA, 2019). Indian military spouses contend with even greater progression barriers given vast cultural and administrative variations between widely dispersed bases and border out posts. If not addressed, the constant movement and career disruptions in the military could lead to dissatisfaction and a sense of unrewarding sacrifice, making it difficult to retain personnel [5]. For the nation too, leaving a vast talent pool of educated, worldly wise women under-utilized carries a real economic opportunity cost.

Multiple factors converge to sustain the challenge of underemployment:

- Frequent breaks between jobs as spouses accompany transfers disrupts continuity essential for progression into senior roles [6]. Studies find US military spouses average a 26% turnover rate - losing and acquiring jobs - every year [8]
- Isolated new duty stations especially along borders limit availability of suitable jobs matching spouses' qualifications as per surveys (AWWA Journal). Employers also remain reluctant to invest in training spouses perceived as transient.
- License and professional certification portability barriers across states and specialized occupations deter smooth workforce re-entry after interstate relocations in western countries.[8].
- Persisting societal discouragement against wives pursuing portable careers or expecting organizational support given the cultural emphasis on self-sacrifice for husband's public service tenures. "The nation looks after him, I will look after the house" as an aging military widow phrased it [10]
- Motherhood and parenting duties borne alone during periods of spousal deployment further constrain ability for those aspiring work-life balance rather than homemaker roles.

This mix of disrupted tenure, negative employer perceptions around job hopping, administrative impediments to credential portability and cultural norms prioritizing family care over careers fuels chronic underemployment.

The Psychological Costs of Paused Potential

Beyond economic implications, the emotional tolls of stymied careers constitute “hidden injuries” for military families contends Professor Donna Mooney, a psychologist studying military spouse adaptation challenges [9]. Identity loss arises from severed aspirations and status as spouses sacrifice developing professional personas for transient domesticity. The sense of starting over perpetually also brings social isolation. Anxiety and depression manifests noticeably among military spouses compared to averages as evidenced in UK and US studies [4].

Cultural conditions aggravate matters for Indian military spouses navigating marriages still influenced by traditional patriarchal mores prioritizing husband’s calling over personal evolution. Among junior officer families, average marriage ages also remain young - early to mid 20s, cutting short girls’ professional pursuits. With increasingly educated second generation military spouses joining the workforce, organisations must equally address their career development needs to prevent identity struggles observed among veterans’ wives contending with “lost years of learning” pursuing higher studies [10]. Failing to acknowledge these emotional costs risks converts latent discontent into vociferous resentment that benefits none.

The Significance of Employment for Military Spouses

Enabling military spouse employment through policy interventions matters greatly for upholding national security, welfare and interests. First, military readiness relies on motivation levels maintained through strong family support structures. As the adage goes, “If the army wanted you to have a wife, it would have issued you one.” Spouses provide the invisible emotional armour. Studies consistently find spouses directly influence retention decisions as careers fragment [5]. Addressing employment barriers can directly enhance morale and prolong service tenures.

There exists a strategic imperative too for leveraging educated, globally experienced military spouses as talent pool. Military sociologists Dr Amar Cheema (2015) suggests localized hiring of capable spouses in administrative and support capacities can raise capabilities while reducing salary burdens. Indian multinationals like Axis Bank and Amazon have recently conducted hiring drives targeting defence spouses recognising their organizational strengths. Such recruitment also delivers vital CSR branding.

Most importantly, facilitating career continuity and economic participation for military spouses secures gender equality. This upholds India’s Sustainable Development Goals commitments to full and productive employment for women balancing unpaid care burdens alongside economic ambitions. As women comprise over 90% of military spouses, targeted interventions empower families upholding national service despite opportunity costs of mobility demands.

Globally governments are expanding supports like subsidized childcare, military base career centres, expedited license transfers and tax breaks for defence spouse hiring firms [6]; [7]. Holistic reforms must encompass access focused skilling programs meeting market needs in remote locations, upgraded digital infrastructure assisting telecommuting roles, peer-supported entrepreneurship avenues for location flexibility, preferential public sector openings to value families’ service contributions, affordable transitional housing, customized counselling addressing identity dilemmas, and sensitization campaigns combating employer bias.

Future research around standardized military family surveys can quantify proportions facing underemployment challenges. Statistical human resource databases on intra-forces transfers alongside employment indicators for spouses can reveal correlations to inform responsive policy reforms. Dedicated mixed-method studies eliciting in-depth experiences of families balancing mobility demands and career goals are essential to give voice to overlooked perspectives. Building empirical evidence and acknowledging on-ground challenges can catalyse collaborative efforts between the Department of Military Affairs, Ministry for Women and Child Development, corporate sector and NGOs in expanding flexible, portable avenues for sustaining military spouse employability across turbulent transitions.

Military service entails sacrifice and disruptions in profound proportions for accompanying families. As an infantry Major affirms, for spouses, adaptability becomes second nature through repeated dislocation between alien environs [10]. The unique dedication of forces’ families merits customized organizational supports easing ubiquitous career fragmentation spouses endure. Forward thinking policies focused on upholding their employability and economic participation can empower women, secure retention and unlock national potential. For genuine military inclusion

means embracing those behind the olive greens equally through fulfilling work pathways despite conjoined mobility. No soldier marches alone on the home front either.

The Costs of Mobility for Military Spouses' Careers in India

For Indian military families, frequent outstation transfers between isolated cantonments and border bases is a reality. Wives who accompany serving soldier-husbands to provide household stability often sacrifice personal aspirations. Despite education or skills, this “tying effect” of a spouse trailing their partner’s military postings severely disrupts careers.

A recent survey of Indian army wives reveals the impacts (AWWA, 2020):

- 63% left jobs due to repeated relocations
- 47% suffered over 5 years of career breaks
- 44% report mental strain and identity struggles

Left unaddressed, long gaps plus remote locations leave qualified spouses under-utilized or unsuitable jobs if accessible. Yet meaningful employment provides crucial income, purpose and networks. For partners lacking external family nearby, resuming viable work also allows coordinating childcare.

Underemployment Risks for Educated Spouses

Though official data remains sparse, small studies convey the realities for Indian military spouses from Allahabad to Itanagar. An MOD evaluation found poor infrastructure near smaller bases compelled majority wives to forgo potential careers—instead staying confined within homes (MOD 2017). Veterans too admit many spouses rarely worked across decades of dislocation.

Among recent surveys, over 80% of military wives held degrees but few secured commensurate positions [10]. As an army wife summed it, “I have a Masters in History but sell homemade snacks from home without career prospects here.” Indeed for younger city-raised spouses, cultural expectations to dutifully follow postings regardless bring frustration.

Impacts on Military Retention

Such unmet aspirations due to frequent uprooting have indirect costs too. Over half of personnel report reluctance towards long army tenures owing to familial concerns [10]. For modern, nuclear households juggling military demands, spouse dissatisfaction over work-life imbalance or earning uncertainty becomes pivotal.

Facilitating accessible, flexible employment opportunities nearby or remotely using skills thus assumes significance. Surveyed officers acknowledged localized military spouse hiring programs, transport connectivity and childcare availability can uplift struggling households (IDSA 2017). Helping spouses sustain employability supports national security and gender equality alike by easing the opportunity costs families make.

Targeted Policy Interventions Needed

To address underemployment and career fragmentation from continual mobility, Indian military organizations can introduce:

- Formal reservation quotas for spouse hiring in certain defence civilian, administrative and support roles
- Digital skilling programs tailored to market needs in isolated regions
- Peer entrepreneur mentor networks and subsidized commercial spaces within cantonments
- Expedited certification transfer mechanisms across states
- Part-time project work drawing on networks built during accompanied postings.

Such interventions tailored to military life constraints that spouses navigate can ease employability. Holistic organizational support for families upholding border security remains integral for retention and readiness. After all, empowered spouses directly uplift service members’ effectiveness too.

CONCLUSION

The unique needs of military life require great sacrifice and ability to adapt from spouses who experience frequent relocations, career disruptions, and social isolation. As the research shows, regular interstate transfers and remote postings prevent career progress, leading to chronic underemployment for qualified military wives in India who want to contribute their skills. If left unaddressed, identity struggles, mental health issues, and money instability from

unused skills can negatively impact service member retention and readiness. At the same time, the failure to use educated spouses' potential carries missed opportunities for national productivity and gender equality.

While solid statistics are lacking, global evidence shows military spouses face major mobility constraints that hurt career advancement and earnings over a lifetime. Targeted policy interventions like hiring help, remote work choices, childcare support faster license portability and more importantly employment opportunities within the organization can empower families to sustain employment continuity across turbulent changes. Beyond economic impacts, facilitating fulfilling work opportunities acknowledges the emotional burdens of blocked aspirations military life imposes on spouses tied to the armed forces. Comprehensive organizational reforms focused on easing military spouse employability will uplift national security, welfare and inclusiveness alike by embracing those behind the uniforms equally. As studies show, empowered families directly boost service members' morale and retention. With coordinated efforts, India can transform wives' sacrifices into strengths by unlocking their professional pursuits to benefit collective progress.

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VijayaSri, a researcher, is exploring the intersection of ancient Indian knowledge and contemporary management principles. While deeply fascinated, she faces challenges due to the modern interpretations' limited scope. Pursuing a PhD in Management, she intends to bridge this gap by connecting insights from ancient Sanskrit texts with modern organizational behaviour concepts, focusing on areas like leadership and decision-making.

Beyond her role as an artist showcased in various art galleries, being an army wife has allowed VijayaSri to delve into India's diverse culture, sparking a profound interest in traditional perspectives. Influenced by her orthodox background, her curiosity about ancient Indian scriptures grew early. Studying Sanskrit texts, she found herself captivated by their profound insights into life, leadership, and purpose.

As a student of both Management and Sanskrit, VijayaSri seeks to seamlessly blend psychological and philosophical concepts from India's knowledge systems with contemporary organizational behaviour ideas. Her goal is to integrate this practical wisdom into present-day frameworks.

Balancing multiple passions including exploring Sanskrit texts, management theories, creating visual art, engaging with diverse cultures, and supporting India's military families—VijayaSri, driven by a sense of sacred duty, continues her mission to revive Indian knowledge for current and future business leaders and citizens.