

# NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN UNIFORM: PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY OF A WOMAN OFFICER IN INDIAN ARMED FORCES

**Radhika Bhardwaj**

Crisis Counsellor & Independent Research Scholar  
New Delhi, India

**Abstract :** Women's participation in the Indian Armed Forces has increased over the years; however, their subjective experiences within this traditionally male-dominated institution remain underexplored, particularly from a psychological perspective. Existing research has largely focused on policy frameworks, legal developments, and structural barriers, offering limited insight into how a woman officer experiences and negotiates identity in everyday military life. The present study aimed to explore the lived experience of a woman officer in the Indian Armed Forces with specific focus on identity negotiation within a masculinised organisational culture. Adopting a qualitative research design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study examines in-depth single case narrative from a woman officer with commissioned service experience. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview that explored the participant's experiences of belonging, professional legitimacy, gendered interactions, and the symbolic meaning of the military uniform. The findings reveal three superordinate themes: negotiating belonging within a masculinised culture, experiencing the uniform as both empowering and constraining, and engaging in subtle forms of resilience and resistance. The study highlights identity negotiation as an ongoing psychological process shaped by institutional norms, gendered expectations, and personal meaning-making. By foregrounding a woman officer's voice, the study contributes to military psychology and gender research, offering implications for psychological support, organisational sensitivity, and gender-inclusive practices within the armed forces.

**Index Terms-**Gender and armed forces, Identity negotiation, Interpretative phenomenological analysis, Military identity, SSC, Woman officer.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The armed forces constitute a distinctive institutional environment in which identity is not merely professional but deeply embodied, regulated, and symbolically reinforced through hierarchy, discipline, and collective norms. Military service often reshapes individuals' sense of self, influencing values, behaviour, and social positioning both within and outside the institution. However, the process of identity formation and negotiation assumes particular complexity for women serving in a traditionally male-dominated military structure.

Globally, the inclusion of women in the armed forces has challenged long-standing assumptions about military identity, which has historically been associated with masculinity, physical endurance, emotional restraint, and authority. Research suggests that women in military settings often engage in continuous identity negotiation as they reconcile professional expectations with gendered norms that may implicitly or explicitly question their legitimacy and belonging.

This negotiation occurs not only in interpersonal interactions but also within organisational cultures that privilege masculinised ideals of soldiering and leadership. A woman officer may therefore experience identity tensions as she navigates expectations related to competence, authority, and gender roles simultaneously.

In the Indian context, women's participation in the armed forces has expanded gradually through policy reforms and judicial interventions. Scholarly attention, however, has largely centred on structural issues such as entry modes, tenure limitations, promotion pathways, and legal debates concerning permanent commission. While these analyses are essential for understanding institutional inequality, they provide limited insight into a woman officer's subjective experiences.

The psychological processes through which a woman officer interprets her role, negotiates legitimacy, and constructs professional identity within the armed forces remain relatively underexplored. Identity in military contexts cannot be understood as a static or singular construct. Rather, it is shaped at the intersection of gender, profession, organisational culture, and broader sociocultural expectations.

Moreover, identity negotiation often extends beyond the institutional space of the armed forces into family and social domains. A woman officer may encounter tensions between military identity and traditional expectations surrounding gender roles, marriage, and family life.

Given these complexities, a qualitative phenomenological approach is particularly suitable for examining how a woman officer herself makes sense of her experiences. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) allows researchers to explore how an individual interprets and assigns meaning to significant experiences in her life. By centring a woman officer's narrative, the present study seeks to explore how identity is experienced, challenged, and negotiated within the everyday realities of military life in India.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of the present study was to explore how a woman officer in the Indian Armed Forces experiences, constructs, and negotiates her personal and professional identity within a traditionally male-dominated military culture.

## Research Questions

1. How does a woman officer describe her sense of self and identity within the Indian Armed Forces?
2. What challenges does a woman officer experience in negotiating gender and military identity?
3. How do institutional norms and military culture shape women officer's identity experiences?

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 Identity and Military Culture

Military institutions are widely recognised as powerful sites of identity formation, where discipline, hierarchy, and collective norms shape individual self-concept (Dandeker, 1994). Military identity extends beyond an occupational role and becomes deeply internalised through training, rituals, and everyday practices, influencing how personnel perceive themselves both within and outside the institution (Hockey, 1986; Woodward, 2008).

Scholars have argued that military identity has historically been constructed around masculinised ideals of soldiering (Connell, 2005). Attributes such as physical toughness, emotional restraint, and authoritative leadership are often valorised, positioning masculinity as normative within military culture.

### 2.2 Gender and Identity Negotiation in Male-Dominated Institutions

Research on gender in organisations suggests that women in male-dominated professions frequently engage in identity negotiation to reconcile professional expectations with gender norms (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Women may adopt strategies such as behavioural adaptation, impression management, or emotional restraint to align with organisational expectations.

Within military contexts, studies indicate that women officers often experience heightened visibility and scrutiny, resulting in continuous self-monitoring and performance pressure (Kanter, 1977).

### 2.3 Women in the Military: Global and Indian Perspectives

International scholarship has examined issues such as integration, leadership, and organisational culture within armed forces (Segal, 1995; Carreiras, 2006). These studies highlight ambivalent experiences of inclusion and exclusion shaped by both formal policies and informal cultural practices.

In the Indian context, however, research has primarily focused on structural and policy-oriented issues such as tenure limitations, promotion barriers, and judicial interventions concerning permanent commission. (Parmar, 2020)

### 2.4 Uniform, Symbolism, and Identity

The military uniform functions as a powerful symbol of authority, discipline, and collective identity (Joseph, 1986). While uniforms reinforce cohesion and institutional belonging, they may also constrain individual expression (Craik, 2005).

For women officers, the symbolic neutrality of the uniform is often complicated by gendered visibility, particularly in environments where women remain a minority (Woodward & Winter, 2007).

### 2.5 Rationale for the Present Study

Despite growing literature on women in the military, existing research remains limited in its ability to capture the subjective, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of identity negotiation. Quantitative studies and policy analyses are insufficient to understand how a woman officer interprets and makes meaning of her lived experiences within the armed forces (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers a suitable framework to address this gap by foregrounding lived experience and individual meaning-making. IPA conceptualises identity as dynamic, contextually situated, and continuously interpreted through experience (Smith et al., 2009). By applying this approach to a woman officer in the Indian Armed Forces, the present study seeks to provide a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of identity negotiation grounded in the participant's own narrative.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how a woman officer interprets and negotiates identity within military environments.

### 3.2 Participants

The participant is a woman officer serving within the Indian Armed Forces with several years of commissioned service. To ensure confidentiality, a pseudonym was assigned and identifying information removed from the transcript.

### 3.3 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to identify an information-rich case capable of providing a rich narrative about experiences within the armed forces.

### 3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview, allowing the participant to reflect on experiences related to:

- professional identity
- belonging within military culture
- gendered interactions
- symbolic meaning of the uniform

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the IPA framework proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Analysis involved:

1. Repeated reading of transcripts
2. Initial noting of descriptive and conceptual insights
3. Development of emergent themes
4. Identification of patterns across narratives

### 3.6 Reflexivity

In Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the researcher plays an active interpretative role in engaging with the participant's narrative. Reflexivity was therefore maintained throughout the research process to acknowledge how the researcher's background, assumptions, and relationships may influence data collection and interpretation. The researcher has a professional background in counselling and psychological research, which informed a sensitivity toward the participant's emotional and experiential narrative.

Additionally, the participant was known to the researcher prior to the interview. While this prior acquaintance facilitated access and rapport, it also required careful reflexive awareness to ensure that familiarity did not shape the direction of the interview or the interpretation of responses. During the interview, the researcher consciously adopted a neutral and open stance, encouraging the participant to describe experiences in her own words rather than assuming shared understanding.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

The participant provided informed consent and was assured confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to protect identity and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage.

## 4. FINDINGS

The analysis of Aditi's narrative revealed three superordinate themes that characterize her psychological journey of identity negotiation. These themes reflect her meaning-making processes as she navigates a masculinised organisational culture.

### Superordinate Themes

1. *Becoming "One of Them": Negotiating Belonging in a Masculinised Culture*
2. *Wearing the Uniform, Silencing the Self*
3. *Strength, Pride, and Silent Resistance*

#### 4.1 Becoming "One of Them": Negotiating Belonging in a Masculinised Culture

This theme captures how a woman officer navigates belonging and legitimacy within an institution historically structured around masculine norms. The participant described belonging as something that must be continually negotiated through competence, behavioural adaptation, and institutional recognition.

##### 4.1.1 Symbolic Authority and Gendered Rituals

The participant described moments when institutional rituals such as saluting made her aware of her position within the military hierarchy. These rituals symbolised authority but also reflected the historically masculine structure of military traditions.

"When I first started wearing the uniform, personnel would salute me saying 'Salam sahab.' It made me feel responsible for the position I was holding. But at the same time, it reminded me that this position was traditionally occupied by male officers, and the language has not changed yet. Women officers are still addressed as 'sahab,' which historically refers to a man in authority." (Aditi, 30, SSC Officer)

Aditi reflected on the cognitive dissonance of being addressed as "*sahab*" (sir). While the salute reinforced her authority, the language reminded her that her position was traditionally male.

##### 4.1.2 Performing Competence and Proving Legitimacy

The participant described experiencing heightened expectations to demonstrate competence and leadership capability. Professional legitimacy was often experienced as something that had to be continuously earned.

"As a woman officer, I often feel the need to perform beyond expectations in every role to demonstrate capability." (Aditi, 30, SSC Officer)

Such experiences reinforced the perception that professional credibility required sustained demonstration of competence.

##### 4.1.3 Subtle Gendered Interactions

The participant also reported everyday interactions that reminded her of her gender within the institutional setting.

"One instance that stayed with me was when a senior officer addressed me as 'beta.' While it may have been meant affectionately, it diminished my professional identity."

(Aditi, 30, SSC Officer)

These interactions highlight how informal language can shape perceptions of authority and belonging.

## 4.2 Wearing the Uniform, Silencing the Self

The uniform emerged as a central symbol in the participant's narrative, representing both empowerment and institutional discipline.

### 4.2.1 Pride, Purpose, and Institutional Identity

The participant frequently described the emotional significance associated with wearing the uniform for the first time.

"The first time I wore the uniform, I felt an overwhelming mix of immense responsibility and pride."  
(Aditi, 30, SSC Officer)

### 4.2.2 Conformity and Emotional Regulation

The participant also reflected on how the uniform required her to regulate behaviour and emotions in accordance with military expectations.

"Individually the uniform feels empowering, but organisationally it imposes a code of conduct that influences how you behave."  
(Aditi, 30, SSC Officer)

Aditi noted that while the uniform is empowering, it demands a strict "code of conduct" that requires her to suppress individual traits to fit the institutional mold.

### 4.2.3 Representing the Institution Beyond the Workplace

The participant described feeling responsible for upholding the reputation of the armed forces even outside official duties.

"When you wear the uniform, people expect you to uphold the highest standards of professionalism."  
(Aditi, 30, SSC Officer)

The symbolic authority of the uniform extended into social and civilian contexts.

## 4.3 Strength, Pride, and Silent Resistance

Despite challenges, the participant expressed strong pride in her service and described resilience as a defining element of her identity as an officer.

### 4.3.1 Growth Through Service

The participant described military service as a transformative experience that fostered leadership and personal growth.

"Service has shown me my capacity to grow and lead teams effectively even in high-pressure situations."  
(Aditi, 30, SSC Officer)

### 4.3.2 Professional Commitment as Resistance

The participant often responded to challenges not through confrontation but through dedication to her professional role.

"I prioritise my identity as an officer above all and ensure that personal matters never interfere with professional responsibilities."  
(Aditi, 30, SSC Officer)

This reflects a form of quiet resilience embedded in everyday professional practice.

### 4.3.3 Navigating Institutional Realities

The participant was also aware of organisational dynamics that could affect professional progression.

"Bias, politics, and favoritism over pure merit are rarely acknowledged, but they do affect motivation."  
(Aditi, 30, SSC Officer)

These reflections indicate a critical awareness of institutional structures while maintaining commitment to service.

## Identity Beyond the Institution

The participant also described tensions between military service and broader societal expectations surrounding gender roles and family life.

"Extreme working conditions, remote postings, and frequent transfers make building a stable family life difficult. Sometimes being an officer is still not considered enough, especially when you are unmarried."  
(Aditi, 30, SSC Officer)

This highlights how identity negotiation extends beyond the military institution into societal expectations of womanhood.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The present study explored how a woman officer in the Indian Armed Forces experiences and negotiates her identity within a historically masculinised institutional context. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the findings illuminate identity negotiation as an ongoing psychological process shaped by institutional rituals, gendered interactions, organisational expectations, and personal meaning-making.

The first superordinate theme, "Becoming One of Them: Negotiating Belonging in a Masculinised Culture," reflects how belonging within the armed forces is experienced as something that must be actively achieved. The participant described moments where institutional rituals such as saluting symbolised her authority while simultaneously highlighting the historical masculinity embedded in military traditions. For example, being addressed as "sahab" during salutes evoked both pride and awareness of the male-dominated lineage of military authority. This illustrates how institutional language and rituals continue to carry gendered legacies even as women increasingly occupy positions of leadership.

The participant also described the need to continually demonstrate competence in order to establish professional legitimacy. These accounts resonate strongly with Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism, which suggests that individuals belonging to underrepresented groups within organisations experience heightened visibility and pressure to perform. In this context,

professional credibility was not perceived as automatically granted but rather as something that had to be repeatedly demonstrated through performance, leadership, and resilience.

The second superordinate theme, “Wearing the Uniform, Silencing the Self,” highlights the symbolic and psychological significance of the military uniform. The participant consistently described the uniform as a source of pride and purpose, representing dedication to national service. At the same time, the uniform imposed expectations of emotional discipline, behavioural regulation, and constant professionalism. These findings align with existing scholarship on militarised identity formation, which emphasises the role of discipline, conformity, and collective identity within military culture (Hockey, 1986; Woodward, 2008).

However, for a woman officer, the symbolic power of the uniform carried additional complexities. While it granted institutional authority, it also required constant self-regulation in environments where gendered perceptions remained present. The uniform thus functioned as both a source of empowerment and a mechanism of institutional conformity.

The third superordinate theme, “Strength, Pride, and Silent Resistance,” complicates narratives that frame women’s military experiences solely through the lens of marginalisation. The participant articulated strong pride in her service and described military careers as transformative journeys of personal growth and leadership development. Importantly, resistance was not always expressed through confrontation. Instead, the participant often described subtle forms of resilience, such as sustained professional dedication, consistent performance, and redefining leadership in ways that integrated empathy and responsibility.

These forms of quiet perseverance resonate with feminist scholarship on everyday resistance within gendered institutions (Sasson-Levy, 2011). Rather than rejecting institutional norms entirely, a woman officer appears to negotiate identity through strategic adaptation while maintaining commitment to her professional role.

Finally, the participant’s narrative revealed that identity negotiation extended beyond the institutional boundaries of the armed forces into broader social contexts. Societal expectations surrounding marriage, family life, and gender roles created additional tensions, particularly given the demanding nature of military service. The intersection of professional identity and societal expectations highlights how a woman officer must navigate multiple identity frameworks simultaneously.

Overall, the findings illustrate that identity negotiation within the armed forces is not a static process but an evolving psychological experience shaped by institutional structures, cultural norms, and personal resilience.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

### 6.1 Psychological Implications

The findings highlight identity negotiation as a psychologically demanding process involving continuous self-monitoring, emotional regulation, and the need to demonstrate professional legitimacy. These pressures may influence long-term well-being, job satisfaction, and professional confidence among women officers. (Note: Remains plural as it implies the broader group affected by the finding).

The study therefore underscores the importance of gender-sensitive psychological support systems within the armed forces. Confidential counselling services, peer-support networks, and structured mentorship programmes may help a woman officer process identity-related stress and maintain psychological well-being while navigating demanding professional environments.

### 6.2 Organisational and Policy Implications

While institutional reforms have gradually expanded opportunities for women officers, the findings suggest that informal cultural practices and everyday interactions continue to shape experiences of belonging and legitimacy. Leadership training programmes that address gender dynamics and unconscious bias may help foster more inclusive organisational cultures. Additionally, mentorship programmes involving senior women officers could provide valuable guidance for a younger officer navigating identity-related challenges within military environments.

### 6.3 Research Implications

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in capturing nuanced, subjective dimensions of military life that may not emerge through quantitative research. By focusing on lived experience, IPA allows researchers to explore how an individual interprets institutional environments and constructs meaning around professional identity.

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a qualitative study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the findings are based on a single-case idiographic focus. While this approach allows for in-depth exploration of lived experience, it limits the generalisability of findings across the broader population of women officers.

Second, the participant’s narrative represents subjective interpretations shaped by personal experiences, organisational contexts, and individual coping styles. Retrospective reflection may also influence how experiences are remembered and described.

Third, the sensitive nature of military service may have constrained full disclosure despite assurances of confidentiality. The participant may have exercised caution when discussing institutional dynamics or professional challenges.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The present study explored the lived experience of a woman officer in the Indian Armed Forces, focusing on how identity is constructed and negotiated within a historically male-dominated institutional culture. Through Interpretative Phenomenological

Analysis, the findings reveal identity negotiation as an ongoing and multifaceted process shaped by institutional rituals, organisational expectations, and broader societal norms.

A woman officer described navigating belonging through sustained professional competence, emotional discipline, and subtle forms of resilience. The military uniform emerged as a powerful symbol of both pride and institutional responsibility, simultaneously empowering an individual while reinforcing expectations of conformity.

Importantly, the findings highlight that a woman officer is not merely a passive recipient of institutional structures but an active agent in shaping her professional identity. Through perseverance, leadership, and quiet resistance, she continuously negotiates meanings of authority, competence, and belonging within the armed forces.

By foregrounding a woman officer's voice, the study contributes to the growing field of military psychology by illuminating the psychological dimensions of military identity. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for developing organisational cultures that support inclusivity, well-being, and professional growth within the armed forces.

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