Unveiled: Narratives from Muslim Women in the Philippine Army

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This article focuses on what it means to be a woman in a male-dominated organization such as the military in the Philippines, and more specifically a Muslim woman in a Christian-dominated Army. It draws on the larger findings of a research project funded by the East Asian Development Network (EADN) which examined patterns of recruitment, training, placement, advancement and work experiences of female Army and Police personnel in three collocated Army infantry units in Mindanao. It probes the findings gleaned from that wider study on female soldiers (43 Army officers and enlisted personnel) and zooms in on a subset of 11 Muslim enlisted women among them.

Context

In 1996, the Philippine military broke new ground when 5,750 former Islamic rebels and their proxies from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) were integrated into the Army in line with the terms of the Final Peace Agreement between the national government and MNLF. A replacement batch was recruited in 2007 to make up for those who had left the rebel force in the interim or had been killed in action. The intake included 28 young Muslim enlisted women, all of whom were selected largely because of their familial ties with ex-rebels. The MNLF integration programme constituted the single largest recruitment of Muslims into army units, which were subsequently deployed in Mindanao for civil-military operations. While a small number, the Muslim female soldiers were deployed at the battalion level and in active front lines where their religious-cultural credentials are much valued in the army’s counterinsurgency operations.

1 The project featured data gathered through sixteen focus group discussions (FGD) with 43 female Army officers/enlisted women/ Women Auxiliary Corps (11 of whom are Muslims) and 88 female police commissioned and non-commissioned officers (17 of whom are Muslims) in Army and Police units in Cotabato (6th Infantry Division, Police Regional Office – Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao or ARMM, Cotabato City Police), Davao (10th Infantry Division, Police Regional Office X, Davao City Police) and Cagayan de Oro (4th Infantry Division, Police Regional Office XI, Cagayan de Oro City Police) conducted from October 2010-January 2011. FGD participants from the Army were chosen by the commanding officer based on some parameters supplied by the researcher (e.g. that all be females ; some be Muslims ; that they come from different offices/units ; that they be distributed between headquarters and combat units). The Muslim enlisted women were interviewied individually as a subset. The FGD instrument looked at their sociodemographic profile (age, education, marital status, rank, length of service, current and past unit locations/ postings, province where they grew up and their language group) ; substantive questions regarding the nature of their employment (e.g. motivations in joining the force ; how they were recruited ; their personal training experiences; their tasks and work condition at their current or previous postings; career goals and advancement) and the nature of their gender and ethnic identity. For the Muslim enlisted personnel, questions about their identity as a female Muslim prior to and after entry into the Army ; the effect of this identity on their work performance, relationships and goals were posed. Commanding officers at the Infantry Division and Battalion levels were also interviewed with regard to Army policies pertaining to female officers and enlisted.

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This development followed an important gender milestone in the history of the Philippine military: the opening, in 1994, of regular commission through the Philippine Military Academy, Officer Candidate School (OCS) and Reserves to female applicants. The impetus for female integration in the military came from legal mandates (Women in Development Act; Magna Carta for Women), which compelled the institution to equalize its admission, retention and promotion policies accordingly. The mandates engendered ground-breaking institutional reforms as the military had to change its existing rules, regulations and amenities in line with the mixed-gender composition of its trainees and personnel. While female soldiers remain a small minority with the armed forces, subsequent changes allowing their placement in combat units and specialization in a wider variety of combat support functions have created ripple effects on the overwhelming masculine organizational culture of the armed services.

Changes in the institutional contour of the Army as organization, particularly on rules relating to women and minorities, created openings for the latter’s entry into the forces. The equalization of training and applicable rules surrounding marriage and maternity as well as the opening of specializations/occupations has made the military more accessible to women. However, these gains are eroded by commander practices which militate against recruiting more women and assigning them to field positions where they can gain the experiences necessary for advancement through the ranks. Ground commanders from infantry battalion units and below are selective and cautious about females joining the troops. Under the targeted recruitment for the MNLF integration program, Muslim women in conflict areas in Mindanao were provided opportunities and given a unique position as interlocutor between their society and the State security forces. Like their male equivalents, the female officers and enlistees are similarly motivated by economic gain, prestige for their families and sense of belongingness to the organization. As a miniscule gender minority and ethnic-other within the predominantly male and Christian army that is deployed for internal security operations, Muslim women exercise agency by articulating and negotiating their roles in line with their perceived cultural limits.

The Intersection between Gender and Ethnicity

While great strides have been made in pursuit of gender equality in business and in the civil bureaucracy, the security services remain one of those areas where women face formidable institutional and cultural barriers to participation. Underlying these barriers is a gender ideology, which equates military service with war/violence and war with a man’s business. Conducting war, in this view, does not belong in the domestic sphere where women ought to be confined (Cooke 2001; Herbert 1998; Sunindyo 1998). By logical extension, women are excluded entirely from military service or if allowed, assigned tasks that replicate their prescribed gender roles as mothers and sisters. Women need protection from war or as caring mothers, their task is to tend to the sick and wounded. A modern iteration of this gendered perspective is the argument that mixed units encourage fraternization, which compromise the ability of men to do their jobs as they will get distracted from the impulse to protect the women in their unit.
Throughout history, large numbers of women have been employed in the armed forces as a temporary measure to replace men who are otherwise engaged in combat. As was the case of Western women during the two world wars, many volunteered to make up for the deficit in male labour in technical and support services, only to be summarily removed once the conflict was over (Segal 1998). While some revolutionary movements have been recorded to accord more equal treatment among its male and female members, this principle of equality was also readily abandoned once the State security forces are organized, leaving women again to go back to their domestic roles (Cooke, 2001).  

Thus, though many women have made substantial contributions to the frontline (in revolutionary, inter-state or world wars), their presence have been devalued or rendered invisible with their designations as non-combatant and civilians, in contrast to men who have served alongside them.

Most governments to date have made great progress towards equal access of males and females to the military; however, varying degrees of combat restrictions remain for female active-duty soldiers. In many cases, recruitment, training, placement and promotion still proceeds along sex-segregated lines. The ubiquity of Women’s Corps in many armed services exemplifies this half-hearted attempt to include females in the organization but to confine them in socially prescribed (administrative, support or technical) tasks. In Israel, the ban on women from combat positions and the priority for women to concentrate on family roles combined to produce very small numbers of women called for active service in the conscript-based armed forces. Those assigned to Women’s Corps and functional units are restricted from moving up because of the premium placed on combat experience, from which they are excluded. Like elsewhere, Israeli women soldiers work mostly in clerical positions and in that capacity serve akin to mothers/ sisters of their unit (Izraeli, 2000). In the US armed forces, a previous policy banning female soldiers from direct combat units has nevertheless seen an increasing number of them in combat support units being drawn into situations which could easily be defined as “combat” (Harrell et al., 2007). The changing nature of conflict environments (e.g. Afghanistan) where US troops were deployed make such combat/ non-combat distinctions impossible. While many Indonesian women are members of their armed forces, the persistence of informal surrogacy motherhood implied in the practice of ibuh asuh (the wives of commanding officers becoming a source of directives on proper femininity amongst females in the unit) is another of example of domesticization of female roles inside the armed services (Sunindyo, 1998).

In recent years, efforts to “engender” the security forces have been argued on grounds of equal representation and enhanced effectiveness. It is argued that the military

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2 Coughlin (2000) notes that in the case of the Moro National Liberation Front (Philippines), Muslim women members organized and conducted consciousness-raising sessions in rural areas, moved information across army checkpoints, trained and served in a combat capacity and assumed key responsibility in the MNLF’s organizational structure. Siapno (1994) notes, however, that the Muslim women who were involved in the separatist struggle were modern, younger middle-class girls whose more egalitarian disposition was in tension with conventional ideas of patriarchal control which assume that it is the men’s responsibility to protect their womenfolk.
promotes the value of equality under a democratic order by openly admitting both sexes into its ranks. By reflecting the diverse composition of the broader society, the security forces attain wider public acceptance of their tasks. By recruiting more widely, the military can avail itself of a larger, ready pool of skilled human labour. It will be able to do its job much better if it has members who can attend to tasks such as conducting searches and interrogation of subjects with whom they share common gender attributes. Efforts towards this goal has proceeded in several complementary directions: (1) increasing the number of women recruited as enlistees and officers; (2) ending sex and ethnic segregation in training, placement and promotion; (3) opening up previously restricted roles (e.g. ground combat) and unit postings (i.e. non-deployment in ethnic frontlines); (4) redefining requirements for advancement in the ranks (e.g. combat experience) that confer disadvantage to women.

However, female presence hardly undercuts the uncompromising cultural masculinity of the security forces as institutions. In many cases, the female numbers are so low in proportion to the males, their participation verges on tokenism. Herbert’s (1998) study of the American female soldiers illustrates the pressure to assimilate in a predominantly male environment. US servicewomen subdue their outward femininity, emphasize their skills rather than physical attributes, adopt more male mannerisms and suppress their sexuality in order to avoid perceived social penalties. Examining the situation of Dutch female soldiers integrated into predominantly male units, Carreira (2008, p.168-169) observed that they experienced social isolation and exclusion from informal all-boys’ networks. The women also tended to think of their success or failure as reference points for all similarly situated women in their occupation specialty. Hauser (2011) observed similar dynamics among women serving on the Israeli military bases as outsiders and a minority whose failure generates more visibility. However, the same author (p.624) finds that women willingly take on gender-based roles (as clerks, confidants, mother-figures) and accept notions of conventional femininity as a way to find a sense of belonging within the organization. Both Carreiras (2008) and Hauser (2011) find that the women soldiers do not readily recognize discrimination or harassment from their male colleagues. The Dutch women soldiers attribute such misbehaviour to individual male idiosyncrasies while their Israeli counterparts portray it as flattery and confidence-boosting.

The persistence of masculine culture inside the military results in the replication of traditional gender-based roles, even with a strong policy push towards equality. In a study of the progress of gender mainstreaming in security services, SIPRI (2008) researchers noted that when troops return from theatres of operations such as Afghanistan, policy efforts to recruit more women meet with resistance from male commanders whose routine practice is to assign female soldiers in their unit to ancillary or desk-bound tasks (e.g. cooking, clerical work). Izraeli (2000) notes a parallel phenomenon among company commanders in the Israeli Army whose predilection for treating female company clerks as “prizes” leads them to recruit the prettiest in the judgement of the most senior commander. Baaz and Stern (2013, p.717) also attribute the low overall proportion of female enlistees in the rank and file of the Congolese Army in 2003 (as compared to first generation recruits in
the 1960s) to the fact that few male commanders encouraged female accessions. These authors also noted that female participation was questioned by men on the grounds that women were unsuitable for combat and that their presence undermines unit cohesion. In East Timor, women soldiers integrated into the new military also have difficulties overcoming the ingrained sexual division of labour within the FALINTIL (the military wing of FREITILIN), from which many of the integrees were recruited (Mason, 2005).

Among countries with on-going ethnic-based conflicts, efforts to introduce ethnic diversity into the security forces provides added nuance. The minority’s symbolic presence inside the army is said to engender overall confidence that the institution is truly inclusive. Authors like Krebs (2004) and Simonsen (2007) question the supposed shift towards a more inclusive organizational culture arising from this merger. Being a minority group in a society with an on-going or residual identity-based conflict also does not necessarily favour voluntary recruitment into the military that is widely perceived as the “enemy force”. The Pakistani, Ugandan and Fijian militaries are examples of exclusivism and intolerance of other groups. The military in these countries are intimately linked with particular ethnic groups (Punjabis, northern tribes, and indigenous Fijians, respectively) and have been instrumental in the perpetuation of ethnic-based politics (Zirker et al., 2008). In India, colonial legacies and entrenched distrust of Muslims following partition have created an ethnic imbalance inside the Army, which favours Sikhs from Punjab and marginalizes Muslims from other states (Khalidi, 2002). Muslims are underrepresented among both enlistees and officers. The deployment of Indian soldiers on internal security operations to respond to ethnic-based conflict (e.g. Kashmir) militates against recruiting more Muslims for fear that they may become turncoats. There is also strong pressure from the Sikhs whose interests would likely be adversely affected in the event of an increased Muslim quota. Because the armed services confer tangible economic and social benefits to its members, ethnic-based jostling for recruitment quotas is all the more politicized.

The recruitment into, and subsequent relational dynamics of ethnic minority women in, the military where it is deployed for internal security operations against the same ethnic minority present unique circumstances. While women in general and Muslim men have found their way into the Philippine armed forces for decades, neither group has risen to the substantial numbers intended by the integration programme for former combatants and proxies of the Moro National Liberation Front in 1996. In total, the programme resulted in the single largest infusion of Muslims (4% of the total military force) into the predominantly Christian armed force. That these Muslim recruits are largely deployed in conflict areas in Mindanao points to the enhanced sensitivity of their posting. While seen as largely contributing to the effectiveness of the army’s counterinsurgency strategy, their deployment among Christian-dominated units stationed in mostly Muslim-dominated communities has consequences on identities and relational dynamics. Unlike the civilian police whose female members are recruited locally and invariably posted in predominantly female-run outfits (e.g. Women and Children’s Desks), the female Muslim integrees are in rotational units that often see them isolated from other female company. Their value as bridges and
interlocutors in the Army’s civil-military operations in Muslim communities is counter-balanced by the traditional views of the women’s need for safety and protection entertained by their commanders and peers.

**Feminine Spaces in Armed Forces: Policy and Practice**

Prior to the 1994 law which for the first time treated female soldiers as “equals”, women in the Philippine armed forces fell under the category of Women’s Auxiliary Corps (WAC). Off hand, many of the rules governing the WAC were discriminatory and sexist. These included (1) a 1974 directive discouraging assignments of WACs to Army infantry divisions, brigades, constabulary or combat zones, except in exceptional circumstances and only for 6 months. The same directive also barred WAC personnel from duties that require use of firearms or extensive physical exertion; (2) a biased career advancement criterion to senior grades which favoured field experience and schooling denied to WAC officers; (3) a physically invasive procedure (vaginal examination) by insensitive male doctors to establish “singlehood” criteria (not having been married previously) for admission; (4) differential criteria for marriage or pregnancy – females were subjected to a longer marriage ban (10 years initially, reduced to 5 years in 1975; further reduced in 1991 to 3 years) and, if they became pregnant while in service, to punitive action from which the servicemen who impregnated them were exempted; (5) pressure for WACs to serve as entertainers, usherettes, receptionists and guides during Army socials (only those assigned to hospitals and dispensaries were exempted); and (6) “beauty” as a criterion for posting and re-enlistment, particularly when applicants exceeded quotas (Medina, 1994; Baraquel, 2001; Advincula, 2001).

Throughout the 1990s, progress was slow in the military (unlike the police) in terms of formulating concrete policies setting numerical goals for the recruitment of women (Baraquel, 2001), clear guidelines as to the assignment of female soldiers to combat, combat support or combat service support units (Gat-eb, 2010), or directives on how commanders and soldiers should treat females in their unit. During that decade, the Philippine military digressed little from its position regarding recruitment ceilings and posting norms: enlisted women were not readily downloaded to the battalion level, and female recruitment remained at the same 1% of the force and 1 officer for 20 enlisted women ratio. Even with “Infantry” as their designated AFP Occupational Specialty, many female personnel were still filling administrative positions within their units ³ (Estrada-Nova, 2005, as cited in

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³ In some ways, it did not depart from the empirical data supplied in Medina’s (1994) study wherein a majority of the WAC personnel she surveyed were predominantly assigned to technical services or personnel administration units, performing mostly administrative duties (as clerks, typists, secretaries, stenographer-recorders, etc.). In a similar study done by Carino (2010), there remains a differential distribution of female personnel across the three services, with the Army more skewed towards combat rather than combat support or combat service support (enlisted women are present in Special Forces – but no female officers), the reverse with the navy, and an almost even distribution for the Air Force. Carino did not have quantitative data on designations but her informants revealed during interviews that those assigned to Army combat units were mostly performing staff functions or supportive roles to the infantry.
Gat-eb 2010, p.32). Most of the female line personnel remained posted in headquarters (with discouragingly very low proportions being assigned to the field). Advincula (2001) notes that the low proportion of women officers in combat assignments was due to technical problems (lack of billeting facilities) rather than to a directive; the ambiguous policy on posting was left to be implemented with great discretion by male officers who were not gender-sensitive, or simply wanted to avoid complications in managing their unit. There were also acknowledged difficulties in performing physically onerous tasks among women assigned to combat units, which enhanced their perceived utility for non-combat tasks undertaken by the same units. In many cases, the key issue is not female soldier assignment to combat units per se, but finding a “niche role” for them in the low-intensity conflict environment in which the unit operates. The prevailing norm was to limit assignment of female personnel to line infantry units exposed to physical danger and endurance, and to steer them towards units in charge of a variety of civil-military operations (e.g. literacy, community organizing and the like) was.

A decade down the road, more changes were instituted within the armed forces shifting the contours of female participation inside the organization. Directives were issued setting more equal treatment in terms of recruitment, selection, training and personnel management, particularly with respect to marriage, maternity and family concerns. In a 2006 memorandum, female line personnel were given the same occupational specialty designations as the males, were allowed to be employed in combat, combat support, combat support service, and security-related activities as well as in administrative roles, and to be assigned jobs in line with their chosen field of specialization, including intelligence, civil-military and psychological operations, information systems and other fields. However, the same memorandum categorically acknowledged the discretion of commanders in deciding how to employ their personnel – hence whether or not to assign the females under their commands to combat units or tasks.

In the Army, a buddy system for female personnel at the field unit is now standard: a tandem of female officer and an enlisted woman is assigned simultaneously to a field unit. Where two female enlistees are posted in the same unit, they are also deployed as buddies/tandem for night guard or patrol duties. The same memorandum required separate billeting and toilet/bath facilities for males and females where they are co-located, and compelled commanders to make a building/space available for their female personnel upon report for duty. During pregnancy, delivery and maternity leave, female soldiers are to be relieved from combat or field, flight or ship duties, and re-assigned to “secure and healthful working conditions” (e.g. headquarters or garrison) and given the option to return or not to original assignment after leave. Female members were given the same terms for maternity leave/benefits as civilian government employees in 1995. The 3-year marriage ban for women was rescinded in 2008. A directive set equal standards for pre-entry training (including

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4 Memorandum issued by the Chief of Staff, dated 26 March 2008.
physical fitness training: PFT), professional military education and all specialization courses for males and females, with a caveat that female candidates undergo pregnancy test as a health precaution, that they be given separate billeting facilities (which are off limits to male classmates and trainers) and that they no longer be exempted from any activity during menstrual period except in an emergency. Clothing allowances and issues were accordingly adjusted for female members who are given sex-appropriate shirts, uniforms and footwear. A provision was issued in 2008 to the effect that recruitment of female personnel into the major and technical and administrative services be not limited to 10% and based on unit needs.

However, informal practices within the military continue to undercut policy intent. Because a great amount of discretion is left to commanders based on their unit needs, it remains a fact that female soldiers are “tracked” in a manner that follows traditional views about women and their appropriate roles. Zaide (2002) and Baraquel (2001) argue that cultural views that women ought to be protected or that Filipinos in general are not ready for female casualties inform decisions by commanders. Hidalgo (2007, as cited in Gat-eb 2010, p.33) notes that female officers are denied (or suffer limited) access to company/battalion commander slots because early in their career they were prevented from pursuing the required training or enjoyed the field exposure necessary to advance to this level.

The Philippine Moro Problem and its Sensitivity

Roughly 5% of the Philippine population are Muslims, who are largely concentrated in central Mindanao, Zamboanga peninsula and in the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. The “Moro” (a term appropriated for Muslim Filipinos by subsequent identity-based armed movements) claim their homeland (“Bangsamoro”) as historically distinct from the Philippine nation, which largely grew out of Spanish and American colonization. While the notion of Muslim identity being key is common among movement elites, many scholars argue that the lower economic strata among the thirteen ethno-linguistic tribes (e.g. Maguindananawon, Maranao, Tausug, Yakan, Samal, etc.) in Mindanao who are adherents of Islam do not readily identify themselves as Muslims or Moros. Muslim identity articulation is more prominent among elites whose upward and national mobility is restrained on

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6 The military’s conservative moral stance remains: admission of female applicants who are discovered pregnant during training is deferred until the following year. But unmarried commissioned officers positively found to be pregnant, or to have had an abortion or miscarriage are discharged from the service. No such provision exists for men.

7 Interestingly, among those listed as clothing allowance in kind for enlisted women are a dress and a pair of heeled shoes.


9 A great degree of flexibility was observed in the interpretation of Republic Act 3835, which restricted WACs to administrative duties. In fact some of them were assigned to perform combat service support duties (Gate-eb 2010, 43). Medina (1994) notes that she had WAC respondents who were assigned to the Intelligence Service and in fact underwent training as part of counterinsurgency strategies, including civil-military, psychological, intelligence, scout ranger, special forces and airborne operations.

account of their minority status and decades of national government neglect, assimilation attempts and State-sponsored Christian migration into their ancestral homelands (see Tan, 1993; Abinales, 2000). According to a recent study by Dunham-Scott (2012), tribal identities are more salient among Philippine Muslim soldiers, and both Christian and Muslim soldiers’ cultural practices are apt to vary among these tribes.

The conflict between the Bangsamoro armed rebels and the Philippine government has been going on for over three decades. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was the first of a series of armed movements, followed later by splinter groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the radical Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Against this threat, the State has deployed the Philippine Army, which constitutes the core of the armed forces in terms of budget, personnel and missions. The ground forces (infantry) have been historically engaged in counterinsurgency operations on multiple fronts, the Islamic insurgency being one of three. With a Christian-majority personnel mirroring the social composition of State employees, the Philippine Army’s infantry campaign in Mindanao in the 1970s and 1980s strongly bore the imprint of an ethnic clash, with many atrocities largely fuelled by failure to understand Muslim cultural sensitivities. When channels for a peaceful negotiation were opened between the national government and the Islamic rebel groups after 1986, the Philippine military shifted from a combat-heavy strategy to an intensive CMO-based counterinsurgency strategy (Hall 2007), for which the Army carried out fundamental organizational reforms designed to enhance its CMO capacity.

The aforementioned developments foreground the MNLF integration project, which was one of the components of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement. The integration scheme involved the individual-based absorption of 5,750 ex-MNLF combatants and their proxies to Army units that were primarily deployed on the Mindanao Bangsamoro theatre. Ostensibly, the government saw this as an opportunity to introduce cultural diversity into the otherwise Christian-dominated Army. As contested religious-based identity is the fulcrum of the Mindanao conflict, having more Muslim soldiers in the force was part of the broader nation-building strategy of increasing Muslim visibility in the public sector. At a symbolic level, the integration project was part and parcel of a broader government push to acknowledge Muslim distinctiveness alongside providing for Islamic holidays as “national” holidays and allowing public employees to observe Ramadan. The minority’s symbolic presence inside the Army is said to engender overall confidence that the institution is truly inclusive and that the rest of the Philippines, writ large, more accepting of Muslims. The entry of Muslims into the forces through the integration programme was also seen in conjunction with enhancing the Army’s effectiveness in carrying out civil-military operations in Muslim communities. To the Army, the Muslim recruits were critical to the strategy of winning hearts and minds. No woman was included among the initial batches of MNLF integration trainees, all of whose names were supplied by the MNLF. Although there was no official MNLF policy barring the inclusion of female ex-combatants/proxies, MNLF leaders and commanders admitted that those women were dissuaded from applying (Hall, 2014). Only in 2008 (with the intake meant to make up for the deficit due to attrition) was
there an effort to target Muslim women. Twenty-eight among hundreds of applicants recommended by MNLF officers were selected as regular enlistees. The Muslim enlisted women were younger and more educated. The belated recruitment of Muslim women for the last integration batch was also premised on their added value to CMOs.

Previous studies assessing the MNLF integration project pointed to overall positive results, with a low exit rate (4%) among the 5,750 new recruits and good performance on their part during their units’ campaign against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Abu Sayyaf Group from 2000 onwards.\(^\text{11}\) Lidasan (2006) credits the permissive training environment allowing the use of some of the training time for religious activities and accommodation of religious needs (time off for Friday prayers, a prayer room and religious supplies, and halal diet) for this positive outcome. Ground commanders in Bangsamoro areas also have developed guidelines allowing Muslim personnel to take rotating vacation breaks during the Ramadan (paralleling Christmas breaks for Christians) and lighter garrison duties if it were known that they were fasting (Hall, 2014).

The newly integrated Muslim female soldiers constitute a distinct sub-group among other female officers and enlistees recruited under the old WAC-scheme or through the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) and Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC). Because their manner of commissioning rested on this supposed Moro-MNLF identity, they are imbued with a heightened sense of representativeness. The subsequent sections explore whether such circumstances generate a different sense of being for these women, compared to the regular female recruits.

**Being a Woman Inside a Male-Dominated Workplace**

Because Army recruitment is largely decentralized, the 10% female recruitment ceiling is often subject to less liberal interpretations than desirable by the respective human resource officers in the recruiting unit. For enlisted personnel recruitment, this maximum is never met on grounds that the frontline units’ primary need is combat skills. Traditional views that women are better for administrative and related secretarial work, for which there is lesser need among frontline units, militate against going for the maximum, as gleaned in these comments by a male personnel officer:

> Because we decide the female quota, what we do is ask various units first how many do they need. At headquarters, we categorize them by skill. For example, we ask how many female computer programmers they want. If they say 50, we give them 50. (If they say) 50 enlisted women for combat we can’t. If the commander thinks differently and asked for 50 women as [undifferentiated] personnel, why not...many of the women are personnel secretary at the Army headquarters. Enlisted women don’t fight, they are an administration resource.

While there are no specific rules against female Army personnel serving in combat or combat support roles, it remains that most of them are typically in administrative and

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technical positions at the division, brigade and battalion headquarters. In the Army, a mixed gender composition is very rare in field/tactical units because of selective posting. The women are so few at the battalion level (EW2-4 and officers) and even rarer still at the company level. This is largely due to the respective unit commanders’ preferences. The practical imperatives associated with having females during operations is a concern for commanders:

Females in operations is a problem because of hygiene and sanitation. If for example, the operations is one week, of course not all places you go to have a toilet...you can’t just have women go wherever, specially if she has monthly period...that’s a problem for the commander. Hence, where they are deployed, they must have facilities.

From the point of view of females, the Army as a government employment option is comparatively less attractive than the police. Army training is considered more rigorous; the likelihood of getting into the Army is lower given their below-ceiling recruitment practice (unlike the police where the 10% female quota is legally mandated); recruiting units can be redeployed in another place. But once at the application stage, the females endure humiliating encounters with the military organization that is often not gender-sensitized in its practices. Many women who participated in the FGD for the research shared the memory that their worse experience during the application process was the physical examination requiring full nudity and cavity (vaginal or anal) search. Some were attended by male doctors (assisted by female nurses); others were by female doctors. The procedure, what it entails and the purpose behind it were never explained to them fully by the medical workers beforehand. As a result, the respondents were in various states of shock when they were told to strip and bend over. Says a female Army officer who was a Philippine Military Academy graduate:

That [cavity search] really happened... if you refuse, you will not pass the exam.
You strengthen your will...because it is a requirement to know if you had previously given birth. So there, you have to strip like you were some slaughtered animal.

The Army features the same training regimen for male and female recruits. With the exception of the MNLF all-female intgee batch, all females go through the requisite training (4 years at the Philippine Military Academy; 6 months Basic Training for Enlisted Army Personnel and Officer Candidates) in mixed-gender intakes. Except for billeting facilities which are separate, the males and females go through the same physical activities and hardships. This requirement for rigorous physical activities transforms the female applicants’ notion of femininity. Most of the FGD participants in fact admitted to being

12 Among the WACs, the medical exam was administered by male physicians. This was one of the sensitive areas tackled by Medina (1994) in her thesis. She recounted how a male doctor bragged before his male colleagues over dinner about “who among the WAC applicants were virgins or not”; identifying them by name. In order to avoid this, for subsequent medical exams, the military only assigned female doctors to examine female applicants or female nurses to administer the vaginal insertion examination with a male doctor in attendance but at some distance.
“kikay” (a female who is conscious of her looks) before they entered the service. Going through the pre-entry training changed their behavioural disposition and physical appearance radically. First, there is the regulation haircut and the standard issue. The female applicants’ hair had to be cut short like the men; as to how short it will be (a few inches above the ear or close crop) varied considerably. Standard issues (white shirt, battle gear, combat boots, socks) are the same, except that women are given sanitary napkins. The training process as explained to them is designed to eliminate their “civilian” disposition. But for many the transformation of their physical appearance and the seeming loss of their feminine aspects was necessary. Among female trainees in the Philippine Military Academy, the pressure to be manly was ever present, yet evokes reflections as well on the persistent habit of male cohorts to treat them like their female kins:

In my analysis, for example in the field, you can’t risk showing your feminine side. If your voice is not whole, you are going to be teased: it’s a sign of weakness. That’s why I tried to change my voice even before going into PMA. My classmates in College even remarked my voice has changed. It’s rather unpleasant to shout “forward march.” A classmate inquired if I was a tomboy or lesbian. I wasn’t offended by the question because I did not mingle freely with the males. But it’s a question of respect if you appear lame. Personally, I had to transform because that’s part of gaining respect, to transform into a male.

I previously thought the PMA is the most gender-biased organization. I feel insulted if say, walking on a special road, my male classmate tells me not to proceed to one area and gets himself into the danger zone in my stead. It’s insulting to me and the same time flattering because here is a male colleague appreciating me as a woman even if I look like trash. But my feeling insulted overpowers the other emotion; I feel insulted because my classmates think I can’t defend myself. It is so different when you’re in training. There the expectation is so strong for you to prove yourself that you can do it even if you’re a female. When you are out of training, you change your perspective. I had a culture shock in learning that it’s different in the Army. Most Army units are not that gender-sensitive yet. Others treat women special, as needing protection; in PMA, you’re a woman, so go. I was surprised being in the Army because they cultivate the female’s sense of helplessness. The expectation is that you are a female, therefore you’ll always be like that.

Sexuality is de-emphasized in the training environment given the physical unattractiveness of the trainees and the tight regimen they are put through, leaving hardly any time for socialization. But despite these, the close quarters inside the training camp and the numerical rarity of the females generate femininity-affirming dynamics. The Army has explicit rules banning open romantic liaisons and physical engagements between the male/female trainees and trainers. For instance, there were explicit rules against males touching the female trainees or even entering/inspecting the female quarters. Although there is a ban against open romantic liaisons, it is a fact that a good number in the training batches produced couples who eventually married after completion. Many were illicit couples who “took life” actions – meaning risked being caught. Flirtation and courtship transpired inside
the training camp, albeit discreetly as such was not allowed. Staying close together in public or going out on an illicit rendezvous were subject to clear sanctions. The females in particular were aware of the danger of engaging in sex, getting pregnant and how that will strike out their chance to finish the training programme.

Regardless, the relations between male and female members of the Army reflect enduring biases and misperceptions. Because of an existing rule meting discharge to a female found pregnant during training or out of wedlock, military educational institutions are understandably worried about how such an occurrence will backfire on their public image. Yet the obvious patriarchal nature of this differential treatment (singling out females but not males) is not readily seen. Says a male officer:

The Filipino values are still there...in Western societies, when a female cadet is caught in an intimate situation, there is only slight demerit. Here if a cadette is caught sleeping with another cadette, you’re in serious trouble. If it was made known, the media will have a feast. There was a female cadette who made love to another cadette... they didn’t do it inside the camp but their liaison bore fruit. This is a violation of the rules. They kept it secret, but during an exercise she had a miscarriage. Who is responsible for this? Ultimately, it is the PMA. With male cadets, it’s ok as long as he is not married and there’s no complaint. It’s a different case with a woman who has a child out of wedlock. Since females were allowed in the army, the lives of soldiers have become more complicated. You can’t forbid people who love each other... they can be sweethearts but they can’t be pregnant.

Army women (officers and enlisted alike) wear battle gear /camouflage and boots on a regular basis, wear no make-up or perfume and by regulation, are tasked to keep their hair at nape length. This stark difference in appearance is not lost to some female Army officers who lament that they seem to have forgotten what it’s like to be feminine in the course of their job.

When queried, none of the female soldiers have heard of a sexual harassment case, although they knew of some males who are harassers. Rather than pursuing official action, they instead talked about how not to attract sexual harassment and how to cope in those situations. The female Army officers say that the ethos of respectful officers in general give them more leverage over enlisted men in their troops.

Precisely because there are so few female officers and enlisted downloaded to frontline units, dynamics in the troops are visibly different when there’s a female in their midst. Among the FGD participants who had been in this position, they admit being uncomfortable by the special treatment accorded by their male commanding officer. Because of the billeting requirement, often the females are given their own rooms/toilet within the same makeshift building where the commander has his quarters. They are also “invited” to share meals with the commander and officers, a practice not usually extended to enlisted men. While without malice and seen as fatherly gestures, says two enlisted women who were posted in a company:

You’re gone for a second and our commanding officer starts looking for us...even at meal times, once he sits down, the two of us (enlisted women) must
be there with him. Even worse now that the two female officers have gone on schooling. During morning formation and the officers are about to eat, they ask for us to go ahead and eat first and not to join the formation (for enlisted personnel). Our CO’s quarter is different from ours, he has his own toilet/bath. Our [own] is outside the building, and we are the only ones who use it. If there are guests, they use our toilet. Our room is beside our CO’s room.

Sometimes, you’re gone 5 minutes and immediately you’re paged. Worse so now...I have to text my CO to tell him where I am going. We are treated differently… I sense that even though he is not giving me orders or making me do senseless errands, my CO just wants to see me there all the time. I often think to myself, “what am I [doing] in this organization?”

While the Army’s policy affirms equal treatment between male and female personnel when it comes to promotion, there remain significant barriers. Female Army personnel’s near absence of combat/field experience make them less competitive vis-a-vis their male counterparts in vying for promotion. Compounding this are family concerns which limit female officers’ mobility in posting (service rotation between Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao is valued by the Army); often, their family situation does not make them amenable to postings (which can last for 2-3 years) away from their family. Male officers by contrast are generally more mobile: their families rarely move with them in the advent of re-posting to another island or province. This dilemma is ever present among female officers who have children:

I have talked to my husband...our children our more important to us now that they’re still little. We do have time together during Christmas, for he understands that I want something to happen with my career path. But it’s really difficult as a mother, it’s really difficult to want a career... what will happen to the children? In consideration of your family, you spend money on [prepaid mobile phone] load...communication is most important... that’s how it works for us but it’s really tough. The first adjustment was with my first baby...I had to bring her to the battalion, which was at Pampanga at that time...so whatever my baby needs, SM [department] store is nearby. But what if I give birth to another child and I’m posted in an area that’s not as organized?

**Being a Muslim Female in the Army**

If 1% of the military are women, the proportion of these servicewomen who are Muslims and belong to the various ethno-linguistic tribes in Mindanao stands little chance of reflecting their proportion in the general population. This is not surprising given the fairly conservative outlook among Muslims regarding the appropriate roles of women (in the home). The decades of conflict in Mindanao also meant that Muslim women (and men) are also least likely to have completed secondary-level education, which is required for entry as an Army enlisted woman. Between the Army and Police, the latter is generally seen as a more attractive option for Muslim women. In fact, many of the Muslim women included in the FGD admitted choosing to join the integration program in the Police first, rather than the Army.
The discussions to follow draw upon the responses of the 11 Muslim enlisted women among the 43 Army FGD participants.\textsuperscript{13} When asked about their motivation and why they considered applying for the profession, many revealed the undue influence of their adult male family members (fathers, uncles) in pressuring them to apply. The “male influence” is expected given that they were recruited through a special commission – that is, they were recommended as “proxies” for ex-combatant male relatives who were given “slots” as part of the peace agreement package between the MNLF and the Philippine government.\textsuperscript{14}

Some got in through male relatives who are “insiders” in the process but were not necessarily given a slot.

Although many have been cadets/officers in military educational organizations (like Citizen Army/Military Training or the Reserve Officer Training Corps), they have not been raised in conservative families. Four admitted to wearing tandong (veil) pre-entry and even after they started serving as soldiers; three said they wear tandong sometimes (during family gatherings) but always don long pants and long-sleeved blouses; some admitted wearing regular clothes (short and short-sleeved t-shirts). But as many were recruited in their late teens or early 20s, their parents’ opinion appears to have played a critical role in their final decision to push through with their application. Some parents were opposed; others encouraged them to apply as having a family member in the Army is a source of prestige:

My father encouraged me to enter the army. My brother is a soldier. When I graduated from high school, I wished to study. But our family finances [were] insufficient so my mother suggested for me to find a job. The timing was good because there was the first batch of females for the integration programme. My father told me to just become a soldier and that I could go to school once I am already inside.

My father remarked “why should I become a soldier when I could very well earn a living without being one?” He suggested I work in the Provincial Capitol instead since he is already a board member. I didn’t go home for one week. After that, my mother cried. She told my father to just give me what I want because she’s worried about what might happen to me. I really wanted to be a soldier because my brother is also one and also some other relatives.

Of the 11 subjects, only two categorically expressed that they wanted to be soldiers. For many, they applied because they wanted a job or considered a career in the Army as providing better job security than the private sector. Others were lukewarm at the idea and simply tried their “luck.” These responses are indicators that as a career option, being a soldier is not that attractive to Muslim females, except as a paid and stable occupation.

\textsuperscript{13} Nine (9) of the 11 identified their tribe/ethnicity as “Maguindanawon”. All 9 also indicated that they grew up in Maguindanao, Cotabato City or South Cotabato.

\textsuperscript{14} The 28 special Muslim enlisted women or female integrees were evenly distributed among the four Infantry Divisions in Mindanao. However, the researcher was not able to tap the other female Muslim integrees as they were posted in areas not covered by the research. There was a parallel integration project for Muslim women among Police non-commissioned officers.
How I was recruited, I was still a fresh college graduate. I couldn’t get a job so my uncle tried to get me in as an MNLF inteege. My slot was my Uncle’s quota. I liked it because I couldn’t find another job.

The integration slots were just “tickets” leading to a series of physical endurance, neuropsychiatric and medical tests, and a final panel interview, which qualified them as candidates. A lot of young Muslim females exercised their own initiative in seeing to it that the required papers are filled in and submitted. In the experience of many Muslims with the integration project, having your name in the list is never a guarantee that you can get in. Many turned up at the recruiting stations in Maguindanao, far more than the quota of 7 females (out of a total of 109 recruits) per Division that had been announced. Below are examples of such recruitment narratives:

I was the one who got my NBI clearance... all my papers but it was my uncle who got me in, he recommended my name. But I didn’t get mine right away because there were so many others with the same name as mine.”

My auntie’s husband was a member of the MNLF processing team but he did not have a quota himself. He told me he’ll put my name in the list and that I should try to get in. Others already had their papers ready; me, I only had my birth certificate but it wasn’t National Statistics Office-certified... I was the last. So I rushed my papers.

The 28 female Muslim soldier-candidates (14 Tausug and 14 Maguindanaawons) were trained in two separate batches (one all-female, the other mixed) which featured both male and female trainers. They were made to wear shorts and shirts (for athletics), although some of the more conservative applicants were allowed to wear long cycling pants underneath their shorts. As narrated, their training process observed policy-prescribed restricted male-female interaction, with male trainers prohibited from physically touching them (though they could be “paddled”, or hit with a stick) and off-limits to their barracks except during announced inspection during which they must be accompanied by a female trainer. The Muslim female trainees were billeted on the top floor of the building while the male recruits occupied the first three. They acknowledged that the male trainers treated them more lightly than the female trainers. Some informal “hazing” took place which strongly challenged these Muslim women’s view about their bodies. Even inside their barracks, they were not treated to any privacy: bathrooms and toilets are common, which at any rate they couldn’t use regularly nor leisurely because they were always subjected to strict time counts (e.g. 10 counts to use the toilet or bathe) or given only a small amount of water. But the training also accommodated their religious specificities by serving only halal food for

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15 The physical endurance test required completing three continuous runs around a one-kilometer oval within the prescribed time.
16 The Muslim enlisted FGD participants estimated that there were about 70-80 female applicants for the 7 slots available per Infantry Division: it was highly competitive.
17 The Muslim female enlistees described “mase-mase”, a common practice whereby they are made to do physically grueling exercises inside their barracks (rolling over like logs).
their meals and giving them one hour prayer time on Fridays (sambayang).\textsuperscript{18} There was no separate mosque for Muslim women at the camp during that period: a private worship space was made available for them in another building. During their scout and jungle training, the food for 2 Tausug females were also separated because they are not allowed to eat fresh water fish.

Six of the 11 female Muslim intellegrs were posted in companies, battalions or task forces out in the field in makeshift billeting – either a separate hut to share with other female buddies or separate quarters and bath/toilet in the same building as their commanding officers. Being the only female or one of a few in this environment generates a certain level of anxiety for the women:

When you’re the lone female in the battalion like me, my main problem is the toilet/bath. Before I bathe, I inspect the area to make sure no male is peering on me.

While they did not mind being posted anywhere geographically, they did have a preference for Division or Brigade headquarters. They had no aversion to being posted in a combat area for they believed it is part of their job; in fact, most of them are currently assigned to battalion-level units and many of them have been in conflict situations or have done field security detail where the threat level is high.\textsuperscript{19}

For the Muslim women, there are clear-cut boundaries in their relations with their male colleagues and superiors, especially when it comes to physical proximity and conversations that are tinged with lewdness. The dynamics of relationships with male cohorts therefore depend very much on conveying the message that they are “respectable” Muslim women observing these behavioural boundaries:

You need to show a man that you are a respectable person because if they see that you are an easy girl, they’ll just overpower you...Respect comes from you or need to do the right thing because it’s tough to mingle with men. In an organization, people have different attitudes...green jokes can’t be avoided. Me, I don’t like being at the receiving end of those kinds of jokes... I don’t like it when they make their feelings known to me.

Enlisted men couldn’t just come near us or be in close proximity; they know it’s taboo for us.

They don’t force us to drink or dance during socials because they know we are Muslims. Optional only, if you like it.

Four FGD respondents who earlier said they were brought up as conservative Muslims before joining the Army point to important changes in their lifestyle. They have

\textsuperscript{18} The female inteege candidates were allowed to bring a prayer shawl and mat for this purpose. The training did not coincide with Ramadan period.

\textsuperscript{19} One respondent who was assigned to the 60th Infantry Battalion was further downloaded to the company level where she was immersed in a community doing CMO. She was later pulled out from the field and brought to company headquarters because she was tagged as having provided information leading to the arrest of a suspected bomb-maker. Another respondent was assigned to Task Force North Cotabato. Her convoy was hit by a landmine in one of their medcap (medical civil action project) sorties. As a member of the 57th Infantry Battalion, she goes on regular patrol duties.
adapted to the clothing and demeanour demanded by their job. Still some point to the inherent tension between how they’re behaving as soldiers and the requirements of their Muslim faith:

    The veil was gone as well as the 5-times a day prayer when I became a soldier...I couldn’t do those anymore because I’m on duty.

    Sometimes, we are detailed as usherettes, serving Christians. We are not allowed to dress up according to our customs. We adopt their customary dress because that’s how we are trained.

    It was obvious that the Muslim women had more trouble adjusting to Army life than the other set of FGD participants. The Army requires women members to subscribe to certain social behaviour which a woman brought up as Muslim may find disconcerting, such as manner of dressing. Only a few expressed a strong desire to cross ranks and become an officer. When queried whether they’ll stay put and build a career, many said they don’t plan to. A number said they will quit the Army (a) upon marriage; (b) once they pay up their salary loan; (c) or when they acquire license to practice another profession (e.g. teaching).

    In sum, the Muslim female soldiers have come into the profession because they originate from families who already have male members in the armed services (Police or Army) or have sufficient family connections to enable them to get coveted slots for entry. While they come from relatively less strict backgrounds of upbringing in the Muslim faith (not surprising given that they are Maguindanawons and Tausugs), their male kin (fathers, brothers, uncles) bore influence on their decision to enter the forces. Regardless, their entry spelled fundamental changes in their outward appearance, many totally abandoning conservative clothing (and the ubiquitous veil or tandong). Like other female soldiers, many were motivated by the prospect of having a secure job and salary, yet somehow they do not see themselves remaining in the organization for the long haul. Because of their numerical rarity, they face serious challenges when posted in the field. For the lone female in a platoon or company, there is pressure to establish boundaries between themselves and the enlisted male soldiers. Some find it even more difficult to assert themselves vis-à-vis their male officers who may take a patronizing stance on their presence.

**Conclusion**

    The Philippine military has made progressive changes in its recruitment, admission, training, assignment and in-service policies that make the institution more accessible to women. The impetus for such changes were largely external (legal mandates) to which the military as a government institution could not but comply. Among these changes were the opening up of commissions and entry to the academy of female applicants, the recategorization from auxiliary to enlisted women (equalizing training and advancement paths in the process), the opening up of specialties and occupations to women, and equal treatment between male and female soldiers in terms of marriage and maternity requirements. Recruitment under the MNLF integration programme was also opened to women for the first time, leading to the entry of young Muslim women into the profession.
Despite these gains, roadblocks remain owing to the decentralized recruitment practices and commander discretion on hiring, which mitigate against going for the maximum 10% recruitment ceiling for women per unit. Commander discretion in terms of assignments also leads to fewer female enlisted and officers being downloaded to field units. Many commanders prefer not to have females in their units given the requirement for separate billeting and facilities their presence entails; if they do have female personnel, they would rather assign them administrative tasks at the headquarters rather than operational roles in the field.

The experiences of women inside the armed forces document how they assimilate to the institution’s masculine culture. Despite emotional discomfort from the physical examination, they proceed because they worry about failing the recruitment process. The physicality demanded by the training and the expectations to do as well as their male cohorts create pressure to be manly in appearance, to suppress their femininity, and to refrain from appearing weak. The women’s concern about their sexuality (getting pregnant) parallels the commanders’ worry that having female cadets/trainees getting pregnant and dropping off adversely affects the institution’s image. Because there are so few of them, Philippine women soldiers become tokens, with individual success/failure taken in as representative of their entire group. The women do not admit to harassment in their workplace but are aware of cases. As the military has not institutionalized gender-sensitive training and mechanisms to process complaints at that point, the women instead focus on their own strategies not to attract harassment and to cope with it if it occurs. The women also admit to special treatment received by officers and commanders although, for the most part, being at the receiving end of such attention and protectiveness makes them feel uncomfortable.

Regardless of varying modalities of entry into the Army, steady employment and educational benefits are key motivational factors among the women. Often these motivations are articulated as personal desire for advancement and also as a way to help their families and communities. For Muslim women, choosing the Army for employment sets them apart from many of their age cohorts. This choice does not appear unusual given their predominantly military family background. They are mostly Police and Army brats who have a level of familiarity with the nature of the job and who understand the potential for upward social mobility in this kind employment (more so than is the case with civilian jobs, which in Mindanao tend to change depending on the political dispensation). Not surprisingly, more initially preferred to join the Police due to a combination of assured quota/slots generating the impression that it is less tough to get in, the prospect of local posting, and physical fitness outfits that cover their legs and arms. However, the accommodation of their special dietary needs and religious obligations (allowing them to worship and giving them special dispensation during Ramadan) during training undoubtedly eased their transition into the organization. Because they are posted in Mindanao-based units, their male colleagues and officers are more attuned to Muslim customs which gives the women greater “breathing space” when it comes to expectations in male-female relationships.
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