

National Service for women: Time to change mindset

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In a recent dialogue session, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen was asked about female conscription, and he answered that it should not be for reasons of equity. In other words, it should be only for demographic reasons - if there are not enough young men to defend the country. To start young women thinking about this possibility, a volunteer corps has been started.

I wholly agree that female conscription should not be undertaken simply for equity reasons. It has been argued that the moral equivalence of national service for women is bearing children, and while this is not directly comparable - not all women bear children, and some bear more than one, for example - the debate quickly degenerates into a male-female divide with emotionally competitive overtones.

The reasons for female conscription must instead be underpinned by national need. However, as I argued in my recent Third S R Nathan Lecture at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on the topic of Security and Sustainability, national need can be more broadly defined than as simply military defence.

In the Singapore 50 years from today, there will possibly be a defence need - but most certainly a social need - for all our young women to be trained in the skills needed by a rapidly ageing society. Therefore, we should start to prepare for this eventuality.

The whole notion of Total Defence, which Singapore subscribes to, is that for a small city-state, military defence is only one part of a more complex equation.

Whatever is critical, not only to the sovereignty of Singapore but also its economic, social and political sustainability, is a strategic imperative which requires full support from its citizenry. In this context, female conscription for military defence should be considered only as a final resort should male conscripts be unable to fulfil military needs.

But conscription may still be warranted, to serve the equally important social and community needs of an ageing population whose well-being is a strategic necessity. That would still fall within the ambit of Total Defence.

But let us deal with purely the defence need first.

The defence imperative

Will the time ever come when universal female conscription becomes necessary to infill for male soldiers? And even if it does not become an absolute necessity, should we prepare for the possible eventuality, given the very long timeframe required for debate and preparation before any implementation?

After all, much debate and preparation will clearly be necessary. There is a huge caveat or qualifier to the overwhelming 98 per cent support of NS by our citizens, which an IPS survey discovered. The same survey revealed that only 9 per cent of all Singaporean women surveyed - and 13 per cent of those under 30 - supported female conscription.

A different study found broadly the same results: A higher proportion - 22 per cent - of Singaporean women support female conscription, but only 9 per cent said they were willing to do it for two years.

In other words, it's great for my father, husband, boyfriend or son to do NS, but not me.

If we are to change young Singaporean women's views about female conscription - which by the way is gender-neutral in the Conscription Act - the first challenge is to convince them that there is indeed a demographic dilemma.

Going by past attempts to raise the issue and the lukewarm response, much convincing remains to be done.

Current demographic trends from the United Nations show that in a "no-change" scenario - meaning we assume current total fertility rates (TFRs) and no in-migration - the male population aged 15 to 24 will decline by around 35 per cent between now and 2040. That is a drop of one-third in 25 years.

The rate of decline will continue so that in 50 years' time - by 2065 - the same male NS-age cohort then will be less than half of its size today.

As the nature of warfare changes, the classic image of thousands of foot-soldiers charging up a hill will necessarily evolve, possibly to one with armed drones skilfully and remotely controlled - by women.

New technologies requiring more brain than brawn are inherently female-friendly and will increasingly enable women to serve meaningful roles in the military.

Today, women make up 33 per cent of the Israel Defence Forces, 15 per cent of the US military, and 7 per cent of the SAF regular forces. More than 90 per cent of the positions in the Israel Defence Forces are available to female soldiers. Starting next year, 100 per cent of vocations in the US military will be available to women.

While it is premature today to conclude that military conscription for two years for women will definitely become necessary, I would argue that we need to start changing mindsets soon. Otherwise it will be too late should the need actually arise one day.

Short-term stints

One way is to introduce universal female conscription for a form of non-military, shorter-term duration focused on supporting our civil defence, Home Team, community and health-care institutions.

Universal female conscription could start with the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), Ministry of Education (MOE) and Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) taking the lead, and with the Ministry of Defence only providing whatever necessary technical support is needed, so that this massive undertaking does not divert our military from its main role.

It could last several months and be held during the interlude between graduating from secondary school and entering tertiary institutions or entering the workforce. Decentralised to the schools level for logistical purposes but with expertise provided by the uniformed services - the Home Team as well as SAF - the programme organised by MCCY could comprise a mix of school-level day classes, field practices and Outward Bound-style residential training.

An annual equivalent of reservist training lasting several weeks during school term breaks could enhance the relearning and refinement of paramedical, para-civil defence or para-police capabilities.

Social imperative

We now come to the social reason for female conscription. The intention is to train future generations of female citizens who are not just actively engaged in the ongoing Total Defence of the nation but also equipped with real-life skills which are different from, but no less important than, those of their male counterparts.

Singapore in the next 50 years will certainly need a far more comprehensive voluntary services sector; national servicewomen could clearly contribute to their country in this area.

One may object at this juncture to say this is tantamount to getting young women to perform cheap labour in place of foreign nurses on full wages.

My answer is yes: Female conscription for social purposes would indeed supplement and to some degree even replace foreign professional caregivers.

And what is wrong with that?

It will be a bleak and dismal Singapore when our own citizens do not feel it is their duty to perform vital tasks critical for the well-being of our society, on the grounds that it can be equally performed by foreign workers. If the same reluctance is applied to soldiering, then one might argue that it is better to outsource this to foreign mercenary soldiers than to require our young men to be conscripted.

Singapore is one of the fastest- ageing countries in the world. If our birth rates remain as they are now and there is no net in-migration, in the next 50 years the percentage of people over 65 years old will jump threefold and even overtake Japan, which is acknowledged as a fast-ageing society.

Today only about one in 10 Singaporeans is considered elderly; in 50 years this will be nearly one in two. While the elderly can try to be more self-reliant - with the aid of robots, for example - the strain on our social services will be enormous. Singapore already does not have enough

trained nurses to service current hospital needs; imagine the strain on community services for the elderly by then.

The silver tsunami advancing our way needs an interpretation of Total Defence which involves our young women being trained to counter this threat, while being psychologically prepared to also undergo military training in a more distant future should the military need become a necessity.

An important point, however, is to maintain the fundamental ethos of universal national service - so it should be truly universal for all young Singaporean women and not be on a voluntary basis.

The argument for equity is applicable here: If our young female citizens are needed for defence of the nation or for community and social work in an ageing and declining population, that responsibility should fall onto every young female citizen.

Young men may well counter: Why not let NS be totally neutral and allow men to opt for caregiving and women for two-year military service?

I think the answer is obvious: It should be fine for women to opt for two-year military service rather than three- to five-month community conscription. But to allow men to swop a two-year military regime for several months of Home Team training is obviously to undermine the whole egalitarian intent of NS.

In the course of preparing my lecture, and now article, for this topic, I've spoken to many young women on the subject of female conscription. Once I made clear that the proposal is for only several months during an educational transition, I found the response to be overwhelmingly positive.

Most young women I met are keen to acquire practical skills in physical self-protection, civil defence and paramedical care. Their love of country and society is certainly no less than that of their male brethren, and they are keen to demonstrate it. Let's give them a chance to show it.

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