

NS is no Glorified Boot Camp

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THE strong affirmation of national service among almost all Singaporeans is a clear indication of how rooted the vital institution has become here. The findings of an Institute of Policy Studies survey also revealed different perceptions of NS that leave niggling afterthoughts. NS means more to citizens as a way of instilling discipline and values among the young than as a main pillar of national defence.

To be sure, only a sliver of 0.04 separated the scores of the two perceived purposes but also close was the respondents' rating for transforming boys to men. Other social factors were ranked highly too like national education, building a unique Singaporean identity and promoting understanding among people from different backgrounds.

“What used to be peripheral roles of NS,” as the study noted, “are now recognised by many Singaporeans as a major contribution.”

The notion of NS as a motivational boot camp for male teens, rather than a critical component of security, is a bit of an affront to older NSmen. The *raison d'être* of NS – to enable Singapore to act effectively as a “poison shrimp” – has justified the sacrifices of more than 900,000 enlisted men over 46 years and the billions of dollars invested to develop the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) into a potent military force. Social roles are worthy and significant, of course – sentiments shared by the Swiss too when they voted recently to retain conscription. But it's homeland defence that ought to evoke the deepest feelings because at stake is the nation's sovereignty, continued survival, ability to grow and prosper, and preservation of a Singaporean way of life. Security should not be taken for granted as global events can change rapidly. It is the preparedness and technical skill of the SAF that remain fundamental prerequisites for robust deterrence.

The pride taken by Singaporeans in the SAF's military capability deserves to be also reflected in the contributions to defence that women can make as volunteers – a role supported by eight out of 10 people. But suggestions like tapping women to organise lunches for soldiers, help at National Day parades and support military open houses do not do justice to the abilities and grit of Singapore women who are prepared to serve, and not just render support as family members. As times change and women strike out in more domains once dominated by men, it would be natural for them to also seek a more active role in the defence of the nation.

With women more positive about NS than men, as the study noted, they ought to be given a chance to undertake military assignments as volunteers – not just to ensure they aren't playing second fiddle but also to reinforce the core purpose of NS.