

S'poreans want PRs, Women to be Part of National Defence

The first independent survey on Singaporeans' attitudes towards National Service (NS) has found that a large majority felt that first-generation Permanent Residents (PRs) and women should be allowed to contribute to national defence as volunteers, with four in 10 indicating that the former should serve two years of full-time NS.

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SINGAPORE — The first independent survey on Singaporeans' attitudes towards National Service (NS) has found that a large majority felt that first-generation Permanent Residents (PRs) and women should be allowed to contribute to national defence as volunteers, with four in 10 indicating that the former should serve two years of full-time NS.

The Committee to Strengthen National Service (CSNS), which commissioned the study, also revealed yesterday that it is looking at expanding the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) volunteer scheme, to possibly allow volunteers to serve in combat roles.

The survey was conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) between July and September. A sample of 1,251 respondents, representative of the national demographic profile, were interviewed face-to-face. The Ministry of Defence is understood to conduct periodic surveys on public perceptions of NS.

The wide-ranging IPS survey found strong support for NS as an institution and respondents generally indicated trust and faith in training safety and medical care within the institution, the researchers said.

It also showed, among other findings, about 23 per cent of the respondents felt that women should serve two years of full-time NS. In comparison, about 70 per cent said women should serve “in a professional role” or as a volunteer to “help out in NS events”.

Among the women respondents, about 22 per cent agreed with the statement that women should serve full-time NS, but only 9.3 per cent said they will do so themselves.

When it comes to first-generation PRs, a higher proportion of respondents (43.5 per cent) felt that this group should serve full-time NS. More than 60 per cent felt they should serve in other ways, including as volunteers at events.

While the respondents included PRs, their responses were omitted for further analysis by the researchers because the sample size of this group was too small to be meaningful.

IPS Senior Research Fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, the survey’s Principal Investigator, said: “At this moment, I think the large majority of Singaporeans feels it’s okay for women not to serve ... but for the first-generation PRs, what we see from the result is it’s okay for them not to serve but it’ll be fantastic if they would serve.”

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Act states that every citizen or PR who is at least 16 years and six months of age can be eligible for enlistment as a volunteer. However, the volunteer scheme is not publicised and it is understood that the number of volunteers — who mainly take on nursing roles — is small.

While the main purpose of volunteers is to meet the SAF’s operational needs, observers TODAY spoke to stressed that expanding the volunteer scheme will not signal a shift away from the primary objective of NS to fulfil critical defence needs.

Nee Soon GRC MP Lim Wee Kiak, who is a CSNS member and also chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Defence, said: “Opening up the volunteering opportunities ... will strengthen NS and not weaken it.”

Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Alex Yam, who also sits on the GPC, nevertheless reiterated that “whatever resources we pump into volunteering has to have an outcome in safety and security and not an exercise in integration”.

IPS’ Dr Leong added that it was about striking a balance between “fulfilling a defence mandate as well as social and psychological imperatives”. If Singaporeans start feeling that the system is unfair - in the survey, two out of five servicemen interviewed believed their employers prefer to hire those without NS commitments -- “the legitimacy of the institution will be eroded”, he said.

National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan pointed out that NS primary objective is very clear to Singaporeans and volunteers could plug any gaps and strengthen NS as an institution.

Committee could propose expanded volunteer scheme

Yesterday, the CSNS held a meeting - the fourth so far - at the Home Team Academy. After the meeting, Dr Lim said that the committee is looking at proposing a volunteer scheme for the SAF similar to the ones being put in place by the Home Team which require volunteers to clock a certain number of hours and to perform the same duties as full-time officers.

He added that discussions are ongoing over what vocations SAF volunteers can take on, how to train them for these roles and how long to train them for. The proposed vocations for volunteers will go beyond nursing, and could include combat roles too, Dr Lim shared.

Out of five Singaporean women TODAY spoke to, four said that they will volunteer for NS - with conditions attached.

Merchandise Betty Ho, 35, said she would volunteer at NS events on an ad-hoc basis when her children, now one and three years old, enter secondary school.

Polytechnic student Lee Xiaoyu, 19, said she would not mind serving two to three years of NS in a desk-bound role after she graduates.

Public relations executive Valerie Wang, 23, said she will volunteer if her salary can be matched and her deployment takes into account her skills and abilities. In a national crisis, however, she will volunteer to serve without conditions, she said.

Among other findings, the survey also saw respondents ranking "instilling discipline and values among the young" first when they were asked to rank several statements on what does NS mean to them. "For national defence" was edged out in second place.

Associate Professor Straughan said that she was taken aback by this finding. She pointed out that conscription carries a hefty sacrifice for men and incurs a huge expenditure for the nation. "It's a very expensive endeavour. If we're losing sight of the purpose and intent (of NS), maybe we need a reminder," she said.