

The Case for Women in National Service

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While the recently released Institute of Policy Studies survey reveals ambivalence over whether National Service (NS) should be obligatory for women, my stand on the matter is unequivocal: Yes, it should.

In a TODAY commentary last week, Mr Ho Shu Huang made an eloquent case for increasing efforts to accommodate volunteerism but, again, the manifest inequality embedded in the suggestion is that women should have a choice while men don't — which I believe to be wrong on a number of levels.

It has long irked me that NS should be a “male-only” affair: A sacred institution to be preserved, unquestioned like Catholic priesthood.

This is not because I am some hardline pro-feminism campaigner seeking equality for all. Rather, you might view me as a men's-rights advocate, seeking to redress a gross injustice.

The justifications for this discriminatory policy are numerous, although some hold more merit than others. They range from physical endowment (men tend to be stronger) and economics (drafting women in would further reduce GDP), to inherent responsibility (as my friend so eloquently put it: “I already have to give birth, what more do you want from me?”).

However, I think all these justifications fail for one reason or another. Firstly, physical strength and fitness are not prerequisites for military service; they simply discount combat roles, a rule which already applies to a significant proportion of servicemen.

Also, drafting women in while keeping the current term for men unchanged would indeed lower economic output, but the increased human resource and burden-sharing means shorter service terms would be required from all involved, mitigating the overall impact on our economy.

Conditional relief can also be provided to women who have children (such as a reduction in NS reservist liability), but to waive basic military training altogether on the basis of something as arbitrary as gender is, to me, an indefensible stance.

A MORAL IMPERATIVE

But, rather than tearing down the arguments why women should not sign up for NS, I believe the right way to think about this is to ask why they should. To me, it is a matter of moral imperative.

As a Singaporean, I have a responsibility to contribute to the defence of that which I call home.

The Total Defence framework rightly lists military defence first because, without the physical preservation of our sovereignty, the other four defences — civil, economic, social and psychological — are moot.

The overarching importance of the military to protecting our nation, coupled with the moral obligation for all of us, man or woman, to contribute towards that security, is what I believe justifies the enlistment of women.

I get the sense that the existing NS policy might be rooted in an outdated notion of machismo — where men are viewed as the rightful protectors, while women wait to be rescued from distress.

This is obviously not the case today — and has not been for some time now — and such backward thinking has no place in a modern society such as ours, which espouses the ideals of female emancipation and equal opportunity.

If there is one thing I am sure of, it is that one cannot legislate equality — but legislation should strive not to create or exacerbate inequality.

Unfortunately, that is what the current lopsided NS law does, by creating a not-so-insignificant two-year gap between men and women from the same academic cohort, rather than making each take a “gap year” for NS (a caveat: I know the real maths will not work out as simply as $2 + 0 = 1 + 1$).

In my opinion, legislation should aspire to treat all individuals equally, and to encourage each to contribute to the best of his/her ability.

That is what a law requiring women to serve NS would do.

LAST BASTION?

As a parting thought, I must confess a sneaking suspicion that part of the reason such blatant “male-only” institutions still exist is a misguided (and, ultimately, futile) desire of men to cling on to the fading embers of power — especially in a world where women are increasingly proving to be just as good, if not superior, in many fields.

Perhaps, the fear is that if we let the camel’s nose in the tent then, god forbid, we would have lost the last bastion of masculine pride, should women turn out to be better fighter pilots and military strategists than men.

My stand on the matter, however, is that “no girls allowed” policies should be confined to the domain of one’s childhood play spaces.

Any man or institution, for that matter, deserving of respect should embrace change and challenge as opportunities to prove one’s worth.

History has not been kind to those who adopt close-minded exclusionary policies to secure their influence.

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