

## Women in Organizations: Case of Thailand's Military Institutions

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### Abstract

For most of the woman rights activists, woman entering into military career is a crucial step forward sexual equality. Female soldier represents the symbolic of the more open opportunity for woman to do something that has always been considering as a male dominated job. However, for many feminist scholars, particularly Critical Feminist, woman soldier is just another disguise of gendered inequality in male dominated institutions. This documentary research, therefore, aims to explore the role of women in Thailand's military institutions and examine the linkage between masculinized culture of the military and the struggling of women to reach their position in the Thai army. The findings suggest that there are particular institutional manner and cultivation approaches that reinforce gender differences by giving the specific distinctive training that favors the idea of gendered hierarchy and sexual inequality in the army. The result also reveals some discrimination issues where most of the time the servicewomen would only predominate in clerical, administrative, or supportive specialist and are rarely assigned to job specialties that require them to carry and use arms unless to defend themselves. As a recommendation, it is more useful to look over the female soldier's "obvious agency" of exercising a rational choice to pursue career in the military, and rather focus on how these women can truly be encouraged to exert their agency over the determination of achieving career advancement and overcome the mentioned obstacles by revising the process of "making a soldier" in the Thai military institutions.

**Keywords:** Women in Military, Thai Women, Gender Equality

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## Introduction

In the long history of feminist's struggling for equal rights for women, we have seen many feminist historian draw their attentions to women's equal right to work, right to choose their own spouses and ways of life or to have an equal role as men in the society or even in political regime. Nevertheless, little attention has been given to the right and the role of women in military institutions although military service have also been considered as another career for women in need of job to fulfill their goals and other basic needs. In many countries, women have been given an equal opportunity to enter the military employment just like any other male dominated career such as politician or CEOs. Thus, for most of the woman rights activists, woman entering into military career is a crucial step forward sexual equality. Female soldier represents the symbolic of the more open opportunity for woman to do something that has always been considering as a male dominated job. In other word, the woman rights activists often argue that army should be an equal opportunities employer like any other, with no exceptions of women being female or any gender discrimination. However, an equal opportunity to serve in the army does not mean that military would provide gender equality for men and women. For many feminist scholars, particularly Critical Feminist, woman soldier is just another disguise of gendered inequality in male dominated institutions; there are many evidences reveal the linkage between the masculinized culture of the military and the discrimination, many in form of violence, against female personnel within the organization.

This documentary research, therefore, aims to explore the career path of women in Thailand's military institutions and examine the linkage between masculinized culture of the military and the struggling of women to reach their position in the Thai army. The findings suggest that there are particular institutional manner and cultivation approaches that reinforce gender differences by giving the specific distinctive training that favors the idea of gendered hierarchy and sexual inequality in the army where most of the time the servicewomen would only predominate in clerical, administrative, or supportive specialist and are rarely assigned to job specialties that require them to carry and use arms unless to defend themselves. To examine this issue, this article will start by exploring the idea of feminists on the role of female personnel in military. Then, the discrimination against

female in Thai military institutions will be discussed. This article would then be concluded to argue that it is about time that the society need to look beyond the female soldier's "obvious agency" of exercising a rational choice to pursue career in the military, and rather focus on how these women can truly be encouraged to exert their agency over the determination of achieving career advancement by revising the process of "making a soldier" in the military institutions.

### **Women in War: Critical Feminist's perspective**

Women in war is most likely linked with the dominant image of the protected, suffering victim weeping for husbands and sons in the battle or becoming the sexual material to satisfy the combatant, whether with or without their consent. But since the 1980s the armed services have, in response to the second wave of the women's liberation movement, started to integrate women into their rank and given them front-line roles (Carter, 1998). Some Western feminist suggest that women should leave behind their age-old status, as the weak and protected, to create societies that give women genuine equality by giving them the right and the duty to fight for the armed force on the same term as men. Such as the United States' National Organization for Women in 1981, awoken by the advocacy of liberal equal rights feminist, has a legal brief filed that challenged the constitutionality of an all-male draft and the called for women to register for the draft as the same as men (Ibid)

While Liberal Feminist's goal is to call for women's right in the military as an equal opportunity to perform challenging jobs and fulfill the same duties of citizenship as men, enormous obstacle has been revealed as the evidences of gender inequality such as rape and sexual harassment to the women in the armed service were documented. Horrific examples in Siobhan McHugh's *Minefields and Miniskirts* show that women in war zones are vulnerable not only to rape by the enemy, but by soldier on their own side (McHugh, 2005). Furthermore, the infamous 1992 Tail-hook scandal and many reports on sexual harassment of the female personnel have illustrated the continuing sexism in the United States armed force (Carter, 1998). Thus, despite the feminist's efforts through years and years of fighting to gain women's greater social status and more active part in war, the association between war and rape and the tendency for women to be pushed into the

background in many wars show that women, even as an army personnel, still have to struggle for their equal status and face the risk of violence from their male counterpart in the military institutions.

In contrast with Liberal feminist who see the goal of women's militarization is women's equality defined as sameness with men, critical feminist argue that the women warrior image subjects women to greater manipulation by those controlling military institutions, thus allowing women to be militarized but not empowered (D'Amico, 1998). Critical feminist see that the liberal feminist fascination with the warrior image is dangerous, since the military use the language of "women liberation" behind the sake of "National Security" to meet the institution's need and employ gender categories to control women's participation. The military successfully resist changes in personnel practices that privilege the dominant racial-ethnic gender group unless military planners recognize that such changes benefit the military mission itself.

The most crucial subject, in favor of Critical Feminist perspective, is that women's increasing presence in the military does not change the institution's fundamentally pro-masculine gendered structure. In fact, the increasing presence of women helps legitimize the institution by softening the military's image as an agent of coercion and destruction to the democratic institution that provide equal opportunity for everyone. The equal opportunity in this sense refers to the fact that women can be drafted and serve the military as servicewomen alongside with servicemen. But, just like women in the labor market, most of the time those servicewomen would predominate in clerical, administrative and support medical specialist such as being a nurse or technician . Or, even in some militaries where women receive weapon training, they are rarely assigned to job specialties that require them to carry and use arms unless to defense themselves when their male soldier companion fail to protect them in the confrontation with the enemy. In other word, Critical Feminist argues that the military's equal opportunity reinforce gender differences by giving the specific training to men and women and the particular task they are assigned -- woman soldier is just another disguise of gendered inequality in male dominated institutions.

### **Women in Military Institutions: case of Thailand**

The beginning of women acceptance to serve in Thai army occurred in the period of Field Marshal P. Phibunsongkram, the Prime Minister of Thailand who also held the positions of Commander-in-Chief and Thai Army Commander during World War 2. Under the war, Field Marshal P. Phibunsongkram saw that Thailand needed a troop as many as possible to defend the country. And therefore, a female regiment was established. In recruiting women to receive education in the military school, the same principles as the Army Reserve Cadet was applied to female trainees: when the study is due on the course, female cadets will be put into service in the army position by being given the rank as a second lieutenant. In addition to the aforementioned female cadets, the Army also established a female sergeant school as an opportunity for Thai women to receive education and trained to enter service as a sergeant to perform in the army as well (Arts and Culture Magazine. 2018).

Later in 1943, a volatile situation occurred in the Thai politics, causing Field Marshal P. Phibunsongkram to resign from the position of Prime Minister and retired from the positions of Army commanders. Military policy changes were also made due to the retirement of the Commander-in-Chief. The Ministry of Defense has ordered the change of female cadets and female sergeants to become civil servants for civil defense and anyone who resigns will not be issued government pension. This incident has marked an end of the first female military affairs in Thailand that were prepared to perform at the front of the battle with the male soldiers (Yutthawonsuk, 2013).

However, In 1948, during the establishment of the Department of Territorial Affairs in the Ministry of Defense, both male and female students were open to be admitted to Territorial Defense courses and by the end of the course, students will be appointed as the rank of Designated Sergeant and Designated Sub-Lieutenant, respectively (Changprachak, 2006) Later, in subsequent periods, the government has seen the importance and necessity of female soldiers and women have begun to be recruited into government service as female soldiers again, mainly in the fields of medicine, education, and administration, not in activities related to combat (Yutthawonsuk, 2013).

In 2016, the Thai Royal Air Force (RTAF) announced their decision to recruit the first 5 female pilots into the institution, making it the first time in the history of Thailand

that female pilots are allowed to be in the Air force. This requires special amendment to the Ministry of Defense regulations, as the regulations specified that female soldiers' admission can be done only in the departments that are not directly involved in combat operations. The decision to recruit female pilots into RTAF stems from the loss of male pilots to commercial airlines business as well as the recognition of gender equality among ASEAN society in which the neighboring countries in the ASEAN region, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore began to have female pilots. However, these first female pilots will only be able to operate in conveyor aircrafts, where there will be male Captain and another assistant pilot in the cockpit (Bangkok Post. 2018).

In fact, the law associated with female soldiers of Thailand, namely the Ministry of Defense Regulations on female soldiers, clearly stated in 1984 that women who served in the Thai army could not perform the duties that directly involved in combat and can only enter government services as support soldiers, such as in divisions of Finance, Military Parcels, Medicine and Paramedic, Military Communication, administrative offices etc. In addition, for those who did not graduate from the Cadet School, which is a school that only accepts men, the highest rank to be received in military service, in general, will be only a Colonel. This could be another reason why women are not able to advance their career paths as high as men in the army despite their certain ability to work.

From reviewing research on work motivation and career path of female soldiers, both professional soldiers and female students of military defense or paratroopers, the findings revealed that glass ceiling is still present in Thai military institutions. Although similar practices, training, and teachings are applied between women and men students, several qualitative researches point out that when entering the actual work, the masculine-based training and the biased attitude of the drillmasters towards their female trainees are still prevalent.

The way soldier was made of often favors the idea of gendered hierarchy and the sexual inequality and need to be repeated through their time in the army service. There are various forms of masculinity constructed in norms and values for the making of a soldier in Thai military, for example, the privilege of physical strength and machismo attitudes. The creation of soldiers almost always involves with the constitution of violently misogynist, racism and homophobia messages that delivered through the basic

training, initiation and indoctrination exercises to transform a normal guy into a soldier in the world of masculinized culture (Whitworth, 2004). It is not by coincidence that the insults most new recruits face are gendered, raced and homophobic insults, so that young soldier can learn how to deny and obliterate the “other” within themselves after they were taught manhood (Ketwongkot, 2017)

In general, as the military world has its own unique set of norms of behavior and dress, its own judicial system and its own rights and responsibilities, the military are often described as “total institutions” where differences have to be erased. Everything marked by difference, whether that is women, people of color, or homosexuality have to confront the denigration in everyday training. That could be the main reason why the equally employment of the military institutions to hire women, openly gay men and lesbian usually meet with forms of resistance. For some observers, the presence of women within militaries is both a symptom and a cause of the “decline” of the militaries. As Suzanne E. Hatty writes of women’s involvement in militaries: *“According to this fearful perspective, the presence of women dilutes the masculine character of the institution, erodes the solidarity of the body of fighting men, and introduces confusion and conflict to the system of loyalties”* (cited in Whitworth, 2004) In short, the myth of male superiority is hard to maintain when military men are obliged to work equally alongside, or for, their female companions.

Thus, there is no surprise when some observers point out that female military personnel is one of the bodies that cannot be treated as a same rank- same trained colleague soldier. In the research titled “motives to enroll in Territorial Defense Course and the social transfer to soldier career: case study on the female Territorial Defense student of Bangkok Reserve Affairs Center” conducted by Designated Sub-Lieutenant Ajariya Raksakid, there were some findings that revealed the gendered-bias attitudes of the drillmaster towards their female students; when asked if they think having female soldiers benefit the army, the drillmaster expressed that “to convey military subjects to women, we expect them to be part of the army. We want nurses in times of war and supporters to help fight disaster relief work” (Raksakid, 2015). Or as in the case that once the Royal Thai Air Force has recruited the first female pilots to join forces; these female

pilots will only be able to be in transportation missions, not combat, and required a male Captain and assistant pilot in the cockpit to supervise them (Bangkok Post. 2018).

Despite all the effort that goes into the constitution of soldiers, that identity is never fixed, the process of constituting soldiers is still continued. Soldiers must repeat masculinity practice, such as demonstrate a willingness to use violence, and excise all that is perceived to be feminine, such as demonstrate an absence of emotion, to clinch the male dominated norms into their heart and soul from time to time. Militarized masculinity may be particularly fragile, in part because the hypermasculinized entitlements associated with it require more vigilant and consistent confirmation.

## Conclusion

While the liberal feminist suggest that women drafting into military institutions would show the equal rights as a citizenship of man and woman, Critical feminist argues that there is no such a thing called gender equality in the military institutions. Critical feminist pointed out that female military personnel highly at risk to be abused or to be used to recur the masculinity within the army , and usually struggle to demonstrate their equal capability, responsibilities, strength and status, because of the idea of masculinized hierarchy, practice, culture and a vilification of women's feminine.

Findings from this documentary research suggest that there are particular institutional manner and cultivation approaches that reinforce gender differences by giving the specific distinctive training that favors the idea of gendered hierarchy and sexual inequality in the army. The result reveals some discrimination issues where most of the time Thai female soldiers would only predominate in clerical, administrative, or supportive specialist and are rarely assigned to job specialties that require them to carry and use arms unless to defend themselves. The only place for women in Thai military environment is that defined by the gender distinction: support and service in traditional female occupations and roles.

In Thai military institutions, many women see the army employment as a good opportunity to find a job; a job for those who are seeking to be a clerk, a nurse, or an administrative officer, not a job to fight alongside with their male counterparts. For female soldier who wish to enter the military to be in a combat, the glass ceiling is still there.



Therefore, it is more useful to look over the female soldier's "obvious agency" of exercising a rational choice to pursue career in the military, and rather focus on how these women can truly be encouraged to exert their agency over the determination of achieving career advancement and overcome the mentioned obstacles by revising the process of "making a soldier" in the Thai military institutions. The revision of such process will lead to the reconstruct of male and female officers' attitude and thus structural changes can then be generated.

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