



The Military Wife and the Patriarchal Order

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on over 80 in-depth interviews conducted during seven months of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper explores an underexamined group: women married to officers in the Indian Army. These women enjoy economic stability, social capital, and access to influential networks within and beyond military life. Frequently portrayed as ideal embodiments of grace, decorum, and competence, they are central to the public and institutional representations of military culture. The paper investigates how these women engage with and interpret socio-cultural norms, ideologies, and expectations surrounding gendered roles, male authority, familial relations, marriage customs, and bodily autonomy, including whether they perceive these as patriarchal. It highlights the role of privileged, gendered labour (worldviews) in sustaining the durability and ubiquity of patriarchal power. Far from being passive observers or victims, these women act as conscious agents, interpreting and engaging with gendered practices in complex ways. Their relationships with power, whether through support or critique of patriarchal constructs, are framed as expressions of gendered agency. By examining their everyday socio-political labour, the paper underscores how the private is inherently political and contributes to feminist debates on power and agency. Importantly, it reveals how the same forms of labour that sustain patriarchy can also generate feminist critique, although such critique is often interrupted or resisted by the women themselves. The paper concludes by posing a provocative question: Why do women choose to support patriarchal power?

Keywords: ethnography, feminism, gender equality, everyday labour, standpoint theory

