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Women in Military Families in Indonesia: A gender analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the roles and experiences of women in military families, focusing on their contributions and challenges in managing family life and military obligations. Women in these families, whether as spouses of military personnel or as military members themselves, face unique pressures that include emotional, psychological, and logistical challenges. The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these women navigate their responsibilities and the support systems available to them. Using a scoping review methodology, relevant literature was synthesized to identify key themes, including emotional support, mental health, role balancing, and community involvement. The findings reveal that women in military families often shoulder significant burdens, yet their contributions are essential to family stability and the success of military operations. The study concludes that stronger mental health services and gender-sensitive policies within military institutions are needed to better support these women. The research also highlights the importance of community and policy interventions to enhance the well-being and sustainability of military families, especially in non-Western contexts where cultural factors may add additional layers of complexity. These insights can inform future policies aimed at improving the welfare of military families and their communities.

KEYWORDS: *family dynamics, mental health, military, resilience, women*

INTRODUCTION

Military families, as a unique entity, have been the subject of various studies aimed at understanding the dynamics and impacts of life within them (Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Gray, 2023). However, within the academic discourse surrounding military families, the focus on the role and experiences of women in these families has often not received the attention proportional to its true significance (Trautman, Alhusen, & Gross, 2015).

Women in military families, whether as spouses of military personnel or as military members themselves, face unique dynamics and challenges that have not been fully explored in previous research (Ziff & Garland-Jackson, 2020).

The existence of women in military families has complex and diverse dimensions. These women not only handle ordinary domestic responsibilities but must also adapt to a lifestyle influenced by military involvement. In many cases, they

must juggle various roles, from managing the household to supporting their spouses who serve in the military. However, scientific studies that specifically explore women's unique experiences and challenges in military families remain limited.

Although many studies on military families touch upon some aspects of women's experiences, there has been no systematic review that specifically examines the role and experiences of women in military families in Indonesia. Therefore, a comprehensive scoping review is needed to identify and synthesize findings from previous studies discussing women's roles and experiences in military families.

This review aims to fill the knowledge gap by providing a comprehensive overview of women's roles, challenges, and contributions within military families in Indonesia. This research offers more profound insights into the complex dynamics of women in military families and, thus, a stronger foundation for supporting and understanding their experiences.

Several important studies highlight the depth and complexity of women's contributions within military families. In many ways, they reflect the diversity and resilience of women in facing the unique dynamics of military life. As wives and mothers, they are responsible for the stability and well-being of the family while other family members are serving.

One key study is the research conducted by Park (2011), which reveals how military wives actively adapt to the challenges associated

with life in a military family. The findings of this study highlight the extraordinary flexibility and mental resilience of military wives in dealing with change and uncertainty.

Additionally, Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal (2010) discuss how a husband's military service can affect marital satisfaction for the partner. They suggest that military involvement can bring additional pressures to the relationship but also strengthen emotional connections.

On the other hand, Mansfield et al. (2010) investigated the use of mental health services by the wives of U.S. service members. This study reveals how wives may also experience the psychological impact of their husbands' military service, emphasizing the importance of supporting the mental well-being of the entire military family.

It is important to remember that women in military families not only play the role of wives. Burrell et al. (2006) conducted research on the experiences of women who serve in the military. This study highlights how they manage dual roles as military members and mothers, facing unique challenges related to separation from their families.

Thus, this literature shows that women play a crucial role in military families, both as wives supporting their husbands who serve in the military and as active military members themselves. They are the backbone of families, ensuring stability and well-being amid the challenges of military life.

Moreover, it is important to remember that women in military families do not only serve as wives or mothers. Some women also serve actively in the military, bearing the

same significant responsibilities. Research by Allen et al. (2010) highlights how military service can impact marital relationships and present unique challenges. Their findings emphasize the need for strong support and communication among military couples to maintain a strong relationship amid the pressures of military duties.

Military service can sometimes lead to significant physical separation from the family. Renshaw, Rodrigues, and Jones (2008) examine the impact of service in Iraq on military spouses and suggest that stress levels and marital satisfaction can be significantly affected by the deployment experiences of their partners. This underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the unique challenges military spouses face, especially in the context of deployments in conflict zones.

It is also important to consider the psychological aspects of women's experiences in military families. Karney and Crown (2007) emphasize the importance of mental well-being in maintaining the stability of military families. They suggest that emotional and psychological support is crucial in helping military spouses cope with the pressures and stress associated with military duties.

In the context of military families, communication and support resources play a very important role. Duarte et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between communication and the well-being of military families, stressing the need for easy access to support resources to ensure family well-being.

As the dynamics of military families evolve, it is important to continually update and expand knowledge about the crucial role of women in these families. This will not only deepen the understanding of women's contributions in a military environment but also aid in developing better policies and programs to support the well-being and stability of military families as a whole.

METHODS

This study employed a scoping review methodology to explore and synthesize relevant literature on women in military families. Using keywords such as women, military, family, and Indonesia, this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of women's roles, challenges, and contributions to military families in Indonesia. A systematic online search was conducted using PubMed, PsyNet, Scopus, and Web of Science (WoS) databases. The broad selection of databases was intended to encompass multidisciplinary literature relevant to this theme, and the article selection process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. This methodology is expected to provide a deeper understanding of women's experiences in military families and offer a stronger framework for developing policies and interventions that support their well-being.

The articles selected for review must meet several specific criteria. First, the articles must investigate or discuss women's roles, experiences, challenges, or contributions in

military families, either as wives of military personnel or as military members themselves. Additionally, the focus of the research should include psychological, social, or well-being aspects of women within the context of military life. Eligible studies include primary data, review articles, or meta-analyses relevant to this theme, and the articles must be published in peer-reviewed journals. The time frame was restricted to the last 10 years to ensure the relevance of the findings to current conditions. Lastly, the articles must be published in English or Indonesian.

The scoping review process began with a literature search using PubMed, PsyNet, Scopus, and Web of Science (WoS) databases. Keywords used included terms like women, military, military families, women's roles, and women's well-being, along with combinations of those keywords. A time filter was also applied for articles published in the last 10 years. The literature search results were extracted and screened based on the titles and abstracts of the articles. At this stage, articles irrelevant to the research theme were eliminated.

Next, the articles that passed the initial screening were further evaluated based on their full texts to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. Articles that did not provide relevant data to the research focus were excluded. After the eligibility assessment, relevant data from the selected articles were extracted, including information on study objectives, study populations, methodologies, key findings, and relevance to women's roles, challenges, and contributions in military families.

The extracted data were then synthesized and analyzed narratively to identify key themes. Some of the analyzed categories included psychological impacts, social challenges, and the role of women in supporting military family members. The synthesis process helped uncover common patterns or gaps in the relevant literature. Finally, the results of the scoping review were reported using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, which included a flow diagram of the article selection process and a summary of key findings.

With this approach, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of the role of women in military families. Additionally, the findings are anticipated to help develop policies and interventions that support the well-being of women in military families and provide direction for further research in the future.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram is a tool used to depict the study selection and inclusion process in a systematic review or meta-analysis. This diagram provides a visualization of the flow of information through various stages of review, from identification to the final inclusion of studies. Below is an explanation of the stages in the PRISMA flow diagram in this research.

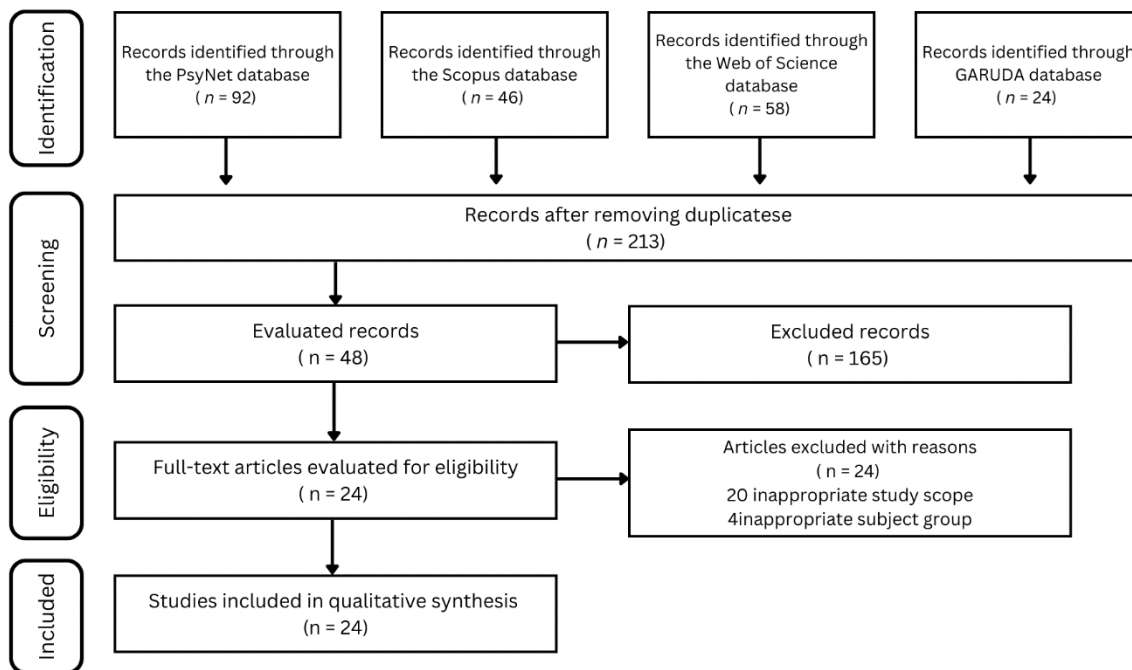


Figure 1. Prisma Flow Diagram of Women in Military Families

In examining the role of women in military families, several key themes emerged from the available literature.

1. Emotional Support and Family Well-Being

Women in military families often serve as the primary source of emotional support, ensuring the family's well-being while their partners are on duty, especially in dangerous or military operations. Afdan (2005) states that family emotional support significantly reduces the anxiety of military wives when their husbands are on operational duty. Additionally, research by Damayanti et al. (2016) highlights that military wives experience anxiety and fear when their husbands serve in conflict-prone areas. However, social support and family involvement can help them overcome these challenges. Similarly, Davis et al. (2011) suggest

that military wives play a crucial role in maintaining family stability during their husbands' deployment, often creating substantial pressure on family relationships.

2. Adaptation to Frequent Relocation and Isolation

Women in military families must constantly adapt to frequent relocations and the social isolation caused by military life. Cleere (2021) reveals that military wives often experience feelings of alienation and isolation due to frequent moves, requiring them to continuously adjust to new environments. Furthermore, research by Cree (2020) highlights how military wives in the UK use the Military Wives Choir as a tool to cope with feelings of isolation and uncertainty in their military lives. They build an emotional community to support each other. Ulfa (2021) also notes

that TNI-AD (Indonesian Army) wives, who are left behind when their husbands are deployed to conflict areas, struggle to cope with stress and adapt through social support from their surroundings.

3. Domestic and Childcare Responsibilities

The traditional role of military wives often involves significant responsibilities in managing the household and caring for children, especially when their husbands are deployed overseas. Abqori (2022) highlights that military wives in Korem 072/Pamungkas Yogyakarta play a vital role in ensuring the continuity of their children's education and managing domestic responsibilities while their husbands are absent. Similarly, Hasanah (2018) explains that military wives in Indonesia are responsible for their children's religious education, emphasizing the importance of their role in shaping the moral and spiritual lives of their families. In terms of childcare, military wives take the primary role in ensuring household stability and their children's development during their husbands' absences (Kusumawardani & Fauziah, 2020).

4. Dual Roles of Women as Military Personnel

Women who serve not only as wives but also as active military personnel face the dual challenge of balancing their professional duties with family obligations. Burrell et al. (2006) highlight that women serving in the military struggle with physical separation from their families, especially when they, too, must

undertake military assignments. Research by Safitri and Listyani (2021) shows that members of Kowad (the Women's Army Corps) often experience role conflict between soldiers and homemakers. In addition, Perry (as cited in Broadstone, 2023) states that good communication between military couples is essential to maintain a balance between duties and family responsibilities, particularly during deployment.

5. Mental and Psychological Well-Being

The mental health of women in military families plays a crucial role in maintaining overall family stability. Fourida (2018) suggests that military wives living in military housing often experience anxiety and depression, especially when their husbands are deployed to conflict areas. In this study, reality therapy proves effective in reducing their anxiety. Karney and Crown (2007) also note that emotional and psychological support is essential for the well-being of military wives, who often face pressure and stress due to military life. The psychological impact is also reflected in Retana's (2020) study, which shows that social support plays a significant role in helping military wives overcome loneliness and emotional stress during their husbands' deployments.

Discussion

The five emerging themes regarding the roles and experiences of women in military families highlight the multifaceted nature of their responsibilities and the unique challenges they face. These themes

arise from the structure and demands of military life, which profoundly impact the women involved. Emotional support and family well-being surface as a critical theme because military wives often have to manage household and family life independently when their spouses are deployed (Afdan, 2005). The absence of their spouses increases the emotional burden on these women, as they not only worry about their spouses' safety but also manage the emotional needs of their children. Studies such as those by Afdan (2005), Davis et al. (2011), and Sutriningsih (2022) confirm that military wives often become the emotional anchors of their families, supporting both their children and their deployed spouses. The importance of family well-being in the military context underscores the need for a more structured support system for these women, particularly during long deployments (Ulfa, 2021).

The second theme, adaptation to frequent relocations and isolation, stems from the transient lifestyle imposed by military service. Military families are often relocated, disrupting the family's social structure and forcing women to constantly adapt to new environments. The psychological toll of frequent relocations, as explored by Cleere (2021) and Cree (2020), is significant, as these women often feel socially isolated and disconnected from the broader society (Hosek, Asch, Fair, Martin & Mattock, 2002). This theme highlights the importance of building strong community networks for military wives, who rely heavily on these connections to cope with feelings of isolation

(Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Lesthari & Permana, 2022; Permana & Aliyyatussa'adah, 2024). However, without structured support, many women may experience profound loneliness, exacerbating the stress of military life (Muhardeni, 2018).

The third theme, domestic responsibilities and childcare, reflects the traditional gender roles that persist within military families, where women are expected to manage the household and children while their husbands are deployed. This theme, as examined by Abqori (2022) and Hasanah (2018), illustrates that military wives often bear the full burden of family management, including the religious and educational upbringing of their children. This role can be exhausting, especially when compounded by the stress of their spouses' deployment (Trautmann, Alhusen, & Gross, 2015). The reliance on women to maintain domestic stability reveals the need for better institutional support for these wives (Abqori, 2019), including access to childcare services and financial assistance during deployments (Zahra, 2023). This likely also increases the vulnerability of military wives to online loans (Permana & Ermawati, 2024) and difficulties in managing family finances (Winianti, 2022) and creates a toxic relationship environment (Permana, Koentjoro, & Azca, 2023).

The fourth theme, the dual roles of women as military personnel, speaks to the growing number of women serving in the military while also managing their responsibilities as wives and mothers. Studies by Burrell et al. (2006) and Safitri and Listyani (2021) show that these women face unique challenges, such

as physical separation from their families and role conflicts between their professional and personal lives. The complexity of balancing military duties with family responsibilities demonstrates the need for gender-sensitive policies in the military that recognize the dual roles women play. This dual role could lead to perceptions of unfairness, especially in how women may be discriminated against within their family relationships (Permana & Putri, 2024). This theme suggests that military institutions must develop policies that support women in managing their professional duties and their family commitments.

The fifth theme, mental and psychological well-being, highlights the emotional toll faced by women in military life, especially those whose husbands are frequently deployed. Studies by Fourida (2018) and Karney and Crown (2007) show that military wives often experience anxiety, depression, and emotional stress due to their unique circumstances. Symptoms that may arise include loneliness due to the absence of their spouses (Yusnita & Budiman, 2018; Permana & Astuti, 2021), dissatisfaction that could lead to marital disharmony (Setyaningrum & Diantina, 2018; Kurnia, Permana, & Taufiq, 2021), and even the potential for self-harm (Permana, 2024). This psychological burden is exacerbated by isolation, role overload, and constant fear for their spouses' safety. This theme underscores the necessity for mental health support services specifically designed for military wives, who face a unique set of psychological challenges not always addressed by traditional mental health services

(Ziff & Garland-Jackson, 2020). Furthermore, there is a need for legal protection and support in cases of domestic violence resulting from mental distress within the family (Zahra, 2023; Juanda, Pawennei, & Bima, 2022).

From these five emerging themes, several findings and insights can be drawn. First, women in military families shoulder a disproportionate emotional and domestic burden. When their husbands are deployed, these women are expected to maintain the household, care for their children, and provide emotional support, often with little external help. This places immense pressure on them, leading to feelings of isolation, stress, and emotional exhaustion. Second, the unique challenges of military life, such as frequent relocations and long separations, exacerbate the already heavy responsibilities these women face. Without a strong support system, many women struggle to cope with the demands of military life.

Another insight is that the military institution itself plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of these women. As the studies on dual-role women demonstrate, the military often fails to recognize or provide adequate support for the complex realities of women who are both soldiers and wives. The lack of gender-sensitive policies within the military creates additional challenges for these women, who must navigate a demanding professional life while maintaining their family responsibilities. These findings highlight the need for policy changes within the military that address the specific needs of women.

The holistic picture of women in military families that emerges from these themes is resilience, strength, vulnerability, and hardship. These women are the backbone of military families, ensuring stability and support for their husbands and children. However, they often do so at great personal cost, enduring emotional and psychological strain, social isolation, and a heavy domestic workload. The complexity of their roles, whether as wives, mothers, or soldiers, underscores the importance of developing more comprehensive support systems for military families.

Several limitations in the research must be acknowledged. First, much of the literature focuses on women in Western military contexts, particularly in the U.S. and the UK, limiting the generalizability of these findings to other cultural contexts, such as Indonesia. Further research is needed to explore the experiences of military wives in non-Western contexts, where cultural and societal expectations may differ significantly. Additionally, there is limited research on the long-term psychological impact of military life on these women, particularly regarding how their roles within military families affect their mental health over time. This further highlights the severe lack of research on women within the military context.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study highlights women's intricate and multifaceted roles in military families, underscoring their essential contributions to both the family unit and the military

structure. Women in these families often balance a range of responsibilities, from providing emotional support and managing household duties to coping with the challenges of frequent relocations and long separations from their spouses. For those who serve in the military, the burden is doubled as they navigate the dual roles of soldier and family caregiver. These findings demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of women in military families but also reveal the immense emotional, psychological, and social pressures they face.

The research also emphasizes the importance of targeted support systems for military wives, particularly regarding mental health and emotional well-being. The psychological strain of managing family responsibilities alongside the challenges of military life often leads to isolation, anxiety, and stress, as highlighted by various studies. A key recommendation from this study is the development of gender-sensitive policies within military institutions that acknowledge and address the unique challenges military wives faced, especially those who also serve as soldiers. By providing better mental health services, childcare support, and community networks, the military can better support the women who are the backbone of military families.

In terms of limitations, the research highlights a gap in studies focusing on non-Western military contexts, such as Indonesia, where cultural and societal factors may shape different experiences for military wives. Future research should explore these diverse contexts and examine the long-term

effects of military life on women's mental health and overall well-being. Expanding the scope of research to include a broader range of experiences will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the roles of women in military

families and inform the development of policies and support systems that are culturally and contextually relevant.

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ABOUT

SALASIKA etymologically derived from Javanese language meaning 'brave woman'. SALASIKA JOURNAL (SJ) is founded in July 2019 as an international open access, scholarly, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal publishing theoretically innovative and methodologically diverse research in the fields of gender studies, sexualities and feminism. Our conception of both theory and method is broad and encompassing, and we welcome contributions from scholars around the world.

SJ is inspired by the need to put into visibility the Indonesian and South East Asian women to ensure a dissemination of knowledge to a wider general audience.

SJ selects at least several outstanding articles by scholars in the early stages of a career in academic research for each issue, thereby providing support for new voices and emerging scholarship.

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There are other journals which address those topics, but SJ approaches the broad areas of gender, sexuality and feminism in an integrated fashion. It further addresses the issue of international collaboration and inclusion as existing gaps in the area of academic publishing by (a) crossing language boundaries and creating a space for publishing and (b) providing an opportunity for innovative emerging scholars to engage in the academic dialogue with established researchers.

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