

Decades of milestones: Is the AFP doing enough to embrace gender inclusivity?

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Traditionally, a soldier is perceived as a profession dominated by strong men. But through the years, as the country becomes more open to discussing gender-related matters, the role of Filipino women has grown in various sectors, including in the military. Scholars attribute the trend to several factors such as a more politically permissible environment that allow for more roles to be opened for women, the increasing personnel pressure as western forces deploy more troops for overseas operations, and more. As defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), [gender equality](#) is the equal valuing by society of the similarities and differences between men and women, and the roles that they play. Gender inclusivity, on one hand, is a concept that goes beyond equality. According to the [Maryville University](#) in the United States, it is the notion that all services, opportunities, and establishments are open to all people, and that female and male stereotypes do not define societal roles and expectations.

Through the course of history, it was only in 1993 when Filipino women were given the right to become trained combat soldiers in the AFP. Signed by then President Fidel V. Ramos, Republic Act No. 7192, or the Women in Development and Nation Building Act, allowed women in the country to enroll as cadets at the Philippine Military Academy (PMA). Prior to the passage of the measure, women were allowed to be part of the now-defunct [Women's Auxiliary Corps \(WAC\)](#), only to perform non-combat and administrative duties, as well as functions prescribed by the Department of National Defense (DND). Service members who belong to the WAC—which was established by Josefa Borrromeo Capistrano in 1963—had been initially restricted from entering into marriage before they have rendered at least five (5) years of continuous service in the Philippine military.

A few years after the creation of the WAC, Presidential Decree No. 1043 was passed, reducing the initial five (5) years of required service to three (3). A section of the decree states that a commissioned officer or an enlisted woman who contracts marriage while in active service will still be automatically separated from the services. Today, PD No. 1043 is already being reviewed, with the Philippine Army planning to reimpose the marriage ban of three years to both men and women who are newly commissioned and enlisted in the force.

Integration of women in the military

Women—when introduced in predominantly male units—are placed under immense pressure to perform well as their achievements and failures are not just individual but is taken for the entire minority group they represent. And if women are in high-status occupational roles, they are perceived as competitors by the men in their group. Nevertheless, as of March 2020, there were 8,000 women in the Philippine military or 2 percent of the 140,000-total population of the AFP. BGen Maxima Ignacio, adjutant general of the AFP, noted that there is an [existing quota placed on the number of women](#) that are allowed to be accepted in the military. According to the [Implementing Rules and Regulations of the Magna Carta for Women \(MCW\)](#), the DND and other government agencies are instructed to raise the quota to 20 percent for female admission into all officer-candidate and non-officer schools, as well as other similar institutions such as the Officer Candidate School (OCS), and the Philippine National Police Academy (PNPA) under the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG).

The MCW also prompts agencies to support women in the military in training and peace-keeping operations, wherein they should receive needed trainings for deployment in compliance to UNSC resolutions on women, peace, and security. Female officers and enlisted personnel who are qualified for peace-keeping operations should also be granted admissions and entitlement to pay increases, additional remunerations, benefits, and other awards.

Today, women in the Philippine military are usually found in support units, while those who are assigned to combat and support roles are mostly given support functions. The Army, for instance, has been assigning female officers and enlisted personnel in infantry divisions, the Mechanized Infantry Division (MID), and Special Operations Command (SOCOM). Women can be considered as a pool of personnel that can be sent into combat operations being conducted by various units of the AFP due to their increasing numbers. It can also serve as an avenue in empowering the country's women sector towards nation-building.

Meanwhile, various studies of gender integration point to women embracing the masculine norms once they become part of the military. Their bodily practices become more masculine, and they adopt mannerisms that are common among men such as talking in low voice. According to scholars, this can be considered as a form of strategy—a way for military women to negotiate their identities inside the male-dominated institution in order to be accepted as part of the unit.

The military and the LGBT community

Aside from women, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) community were also welcomed to join the Philippine military. In 2017, Major General Ernesto Torres, the AFP's chief for civil relations services, said the [institution is open to accepting everyone](#), regardless of their gender, as long as they “behave properly” and abide by the AFP Code of Ethics. Torres underscored that giving equal opportunity to prospective service members proves that the country has zero-tolerance for discrimination within the military ranks.

The AFP has expressed its opposition against the proposed Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression Equality (SOGIE) bill as well, claiming that respect towards the LGBT+ community may be given without “sacrificing the rights of the majority.” In a position paper submitted to the House Committee on Women and Gender Equality, the AFP assured that it does not discriminate anybody based on sex and gender.

The Philippine military, the paper added, has existing policies and [standard operating procedures](#) that protect service members from discrimination and harassment. This is particularly true when in 2018, Bataan 1st District Rep. Geraldine Roman took her oath as a reservist officer of the Philippine military and was given the rank of lieutenant colonel. Roman, who is a staunch advocate of the SOGIE bill, is the [first transgender woman to be part of the AFP reserve force](#).

GAD efforts within the military

When it comes to gender and development issues, the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW) stated that efforts began in the DND and its units as early as 2001. The said activities include the use of non-sexist language in official documents, issuances, and communications within the department; guidelines in annual gender and development planning and budgeting; and the DND Gender and Development Reporting and Monitoring System. NCRFW noted that GAD-related efforts have been consistently programmed in the annual plan and budget since 1995.

Moreover, in 2011, the Philippines launched the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAPWPS) in support of the U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSC) Nos. 1325 and 1820, encompassing the broader gender and development policy of the Philippine government. NAPWPS seeks to carry out the two [UNSC resolutions](#) that require parties in a conflict to uphold women's rights in order to support their participation in peace negotiations and post-conflict resolution.

Among the efforts made by the Philippine government in addressing gender-related issues is the establishment of Gender and Development (GAD) offices in various agencies. In the AFP, the Army is the first service branch to put up its own GAD office, which was first headed by Lieutenant Colonel Ma Victoria Blancaflor CAV (GSC) PA. Activated on 14 October 2014, the Office of the Army Gender and Development (OAGAD) aims to fully attain a GAD-responsive organization that will address growing issues and concerns surrounding gender and development. OAGAD is divided into four parts: the

admin branch, plans and research branch, capacity development branch, and the program and budget branch.

The office has six main functions: 1) to act as the primary policy-making body on gender equality concerns in the Army 2) conduct assessment of gender responsiveness of systems of the Army based on priorities 3) facilitate advocacy activities and other capacity-building programs on gender and development 4) monitor the status of gender mainstreaming efforts, and 6) establish and maintain strong linkages with the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW), non-government organizations, and other institutions that are related to the efficient implementation of GAD projects.

In 2016, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) said the implementation of NAPWPS enabled the AFP to improve its programs on gender initiatives, particularly on capacity building. The ongoing effort in advancing the institutionalization of NAPWPS was made possible through policy formulation, creation of institutional infrastructure, and trainings. However, OPAPP noted that concerns on the integration of women in the ranks remain a challenge for the Philippine military to implement its policies in attaining its mission.

The two other service branches, the Philippine Air Force and the Philippine Navy, have their own GAD offices as well, but the whole AFP only has a division under the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel. According to LTC Blancaflor, the need of having an AFP-wide GAD office depends on the perception of the value of the GAD program in general, which is usually under the purview of a personality-based leadership in the military's organization. The five (5) percent budget for the program is often an audit observation in reports conducted by the Commission on Audit (COA).

In a key informant interview, LTC Blancaflor also laid out some of OAGAD's major programs when she was still heading it. One of which is addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) through the creation of the GBV Referral System and Policy that seeks to provide prompt and efficient access to services for victims and survivors, as well as

their perpetrators. It also ensures efficient documentation and monitoring of cases and the establishment of a feedback loop. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees defines GBV as harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power, and harmful norms. GBV can include sexual, physical, mental, and economic harm inflicted in public or in private.

Other efforts made by the OAGAD include developing mechanisms to address gender issues linked to stress management and mental health, as well as mainstreaming interventions on issues concerning internal security operations missions in intelligence and kinetic operations, to crafting gender-sensitive protocols, advocacy, and training programs.

Conclusion

The integration of women in the AFP proceeded at a time when the military was pursuing a wide variety of modernization goals. The Army in particular has gone through substantive organizational changes pointing to more specialization and professionalization. The trend was also bolstered by the Defense Reform Program that started in 2003, which instituted changes in the entire AFP, particularly in the areas of education and training, personnel management, planning, programming, logistics, acquisition processes, and budgeting. The Capability Upgrade Program's focus on internal security operations also benefitted the Army that makes up the bulk of ground forces.

Data also shows more women in the Army are now doing combat duties, either as front-liners or field commanders, improving gender equality within the institution. Based on the records of the service branch in March 2020, six (6) female officers are assigned as battalion commanders. They are among the 795 female officers and 3,777 women-soldiers in the Army. Col Ramon Zagala, the Army spokesperson, said [women's deployment](#) in top posts underscores the role that female officers and enlisted personnel play in the Army. There also many female junior officers assigned in the front-lines, either

as platoon leaders or company commanders. The smaller units are usually tasked to do actual field operations against threat groups such as the New People's Army (NPA) and Abu Sayyaf.

However, despite these phenomena, LTC Blancaflor underscored that gender-related issues will remain prevalent until the institution will take to heart military professionalism in words and deeds. According to her, if service members are truly military professionals, there will be no GBV such as sexual abuse, and respect for all people will be the norm. Still, all hopes on gender-based talks are not pinned solely on GAD programs, with the military official emphasizing that there should be political will at the top to crush all forms of discrimination, harassment, and abuse.

Scholars believe that to exclude women is the antithesis of equality, which is a standard tenet in a democratic society such as the Philippines. Until women are admitted combat roles and allowed to risk their lives for their motherland, citizenship cannot be equal for men and women. And as more militaries—not just in the archipelago but across the globe—move toward more professional all-volunteer forces, more spaces are created for women. While there were lapses in promoting gender equality and inclusivity within the Philippine military, it cannot be denied that the institution has made tremendous progress in championing gender and development initiatives.

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