

Labour Force Participation of Military Spouses: Global and Indian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Military spouses encounter exceptional challenges in employment due to the frequent relocations and deployments inherent to military life. This review examines the labour force participation outcomes of military spouses globally and in India. Studies across Western countries reveal that military spouses have significantly lower employment rates compared to their civilian counterparts, with gaps ranging from 10-15 percentage points. Frequent relocations disrupt career progression, while deployments increase caregiving responsibilities, hindering consistent workforce engagement.

Underemployment, where spouses work in jobs below their qualifications, is another pervasive issue. Research in the US, UK, Canada, and Australia shows military spouses experience higher rates of underemployment, often taking lower-skilled roles due to relocation constraints. This underemployment results in lower earnings and stalled career mobility.

Policies have been implemented by some nations to support military spouse employment, such as career counselling, job portals, and private sector partnerships. However, more systemic interventions are recommended, including remote work opportunities, credential portability, and subsidized childcare.

In India, cultural norms and structural barriers further restrict labour force participation among military spouses. Only 18-26% of Indian military spouses are formally employed, with most engaged in informal home-based work. Geographic isolation of military bases, lack of public transit, and credential transfer issues exacerbate employment challenges. While local initiatives like vocational training and entrepreneurship guidance exist, centralized national policies are lacking.

Experts recommend interventions tailored for the Indian context, such as standardized licensing frameworks, remote work opportunities, small business support, and public-private partnerships to leverage this underutilized talent pool.

Keywords: *Military spouses; Labour force participation; Employment rates; Underemployment; Relocation challenges; Deployment impact; Policy interventions; Remote work opportunities; Public-private partnerships.*

INTRODUCTION

Military families face unique employment challenges, especially for the spouses. The mobile nature of military service, with frequent relocations and deployments, often negatively affects the careers and job prospects of military spouses worldwide. With over half of military personnel being married globally, the ability of military spouses to find productive employment is very important for the well-being of these families and retaining armed forces personnel.

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This review examines the latest research on the employment situations of military spouses across different countries globally, with a focus on India. It looks at employment rates, issues of underemployment, and the policies implemented by governments and organizations to support this mobile workforce.

In Western nations like the U.S., Canada, U.K., Australia and parts of Europe, studies consistently reveal considerably lower rates of employment among military spouses compared to civilian spouses. The employment gap ranges from 10 to 15 percentage points in most of these countries. The main reasons are frequent relocations that disrupt spouses' careers and the deployments of their military partners, increasing household responsibilities.

In addition to lower employment rates, military spouses globally also experience high levels of underemployment when they do find work. Underemployment means individuals have more qualifications, skills and experience than their current job requires. Due to the mobile military lifestyle, spouses often have to take jobs below their abilities and education levels to accommodate frequent moves. This underemployment results in lower earnings, stalled career growth, and underutilization of their specialized talents.

Despite the fact that some nations have implemented policies like career counselling programs, job portals, and partnerships with private companies to hire military spouses, experts argue that more all-inclusive involvements are needed. Proposed solutions include expanding remote work opportunities, improving licensing/credential transfers across regions, providing childcare support during deployments, and creating public sector jobs with mandatory transfer options.

In India, the situation of military spouses in the workforce is further complicated by socio-cultural factors and gender norms that restrict workforce participation, in addition to the relocation and deployment challenges. Only around 20% of Indian military spouses are formally employed, with most engaged in informal home-based economic activities despite having higher educational qualifications.

This article studies these issues in-depth, highlighting the financial and psychological impacts of underemployment while emphasizing the immediate requirement for all-inclusive national policies tailored to the local context to utilize the untapped potential of military spouses as a skilled talent pool. Enabling productive career paths for this mobile workforce remains an economic and social priority across global contexts.

MILITARY SPOUSES IN LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION – GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Military Spouses' Employment Rates in Labour Force Participation globally

Military spouses around the world consistently face lower employment rates compared to their civilian counterparts. Studies across various nations have found significant gaps in labour force participation between military and non-military spouses. Reasons for lower employment among military spouses relate to the frequent relocations and deployments inherent to military life. This review combines research on the employment rates of military spouses globally and factors driving lower workforce participation in this population.

Employment Gap in Western Countries

A robust body of evidence from Western nations indicates substantially lower rates of employment among military spouses compared to the general population. A RAND study using 20 years of panel data found a gap of around 11 percentage points between employment rates of U.S. military wives compared to similar civilian wives. Canadian data also points to a significant divide, with military spouses exhibiting a 12 percentage point lower employment rate than civilian spouses. In the United Kingdom, military spouses were 10 percentage points less likely to be employed in comparison to the population of all other spouses.

Studies of military spouses in Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands showed similar trends of lower labour force participation compared to civilian peers. A cross-country comparison found military spouses across Western nations consistently exhibit employment rates around 10 to 15 percentage points below non-military spouses. Though military husbands are not immune from employment challenges, military wives face the widest gaps in workforce participation globally.

Barriers to Employment

Two key factors driving lower employment rates among military spouses worldwide are frequent relocations and deployments of military partners. Military families on average move every 1 to 3 years depending on the country, well above civilian mobility rates. Frequent relocations disrupt spouses' career progression, relationships with

employers, and ability to maintain stable employment. Each transfer requires military spouses to spend considerable amount of time searching for new jobs in unfamiliar locations.

Deployments of military partners, often for months at a time, also hamper spouses' ability to work consistently. Research found military wives' probability of employment was 5 to 10 percentage points lower during partner deployments compared to periods without deployment. Deployments increase demands on spouses remaining home as sole caregivers and household managers. Juggling these responsibilities with formal employment is challenging, forcing some spouses to leave jobs during deployment periods.

Financial Trade-offs

The lower employment rates of military spouses have financial implications for families. Research estimates the earnings penalty from lower labour force participation for U.S. military spouses amounts to nearly \$10,000 annually. However, military families appear to value job stability for service members over dual incomes. Surveys found most view the military member's career as primary over a spouse's portable career.

Some families make the choice for spouses to focus on raising children and managing households rather than juggle frequent moves with a career. But for many spouses, lack of employment is involuntary and a source of frustration. Developing policies to facilitate portable career paths for military spouses willing and able to work could improve financial outcomes for families globally.

The Underemployment of Military Spouses in Global Labour Force Participation

In addition to facing challenges finding work, military spouses across the world have a high probability of being underemployed compared to civilian counterparts when they do secure employment. Underemployment refers to situations where workers possess more education, experience, or qualifications than a job requires. For military spouses, frequent relocations often necessitate taking positions below their abilities to accommodate moves. Research on military spouse underemployment spans countries, with remarkably consistent findings.

Prevalence in Western Nations

Studies in the U.S, Canada, U.K, and Australia reveal significantly higher rates of underemployment among military spouses compared to the general population. Analysis of U.S. data found 50% of employed military wives were underemployed versus 36% of civilian wives. Surveys of American military spouses working full-time showed over 75% were overeducated or over skilled for their current job.

Similar trends emerge in other Western contexts. Military spouses in the U.K reported being overqualified or having unused skills in their job than civilian wives. Canadian military spouses exhibited an underemployment rate nearly double that of other college-educated Canadians. Over 50% of employed Australian military spouses felt over skilled for their position.

Financial Implications

Underemployment takes a financial toll on military families through lower earnings. Research found U.S. military wives earned up to \$5 less per hour than expected based on education levels, versus \$3 less for civilian wives. A study across 11 countries showed military spouses earned 8-23% less than matched civilian counterparts in respective nations.

Being overqualified for jobs also hampers career progression. Underemployed workers have fewer opportunities to update skills and gain experience needed for advancement. Constantly starting over in new entry-level roles due to relocations further stalls military spouses' career mobility and earnings potential.

Causes of Underemployment

Underemployment stems from military spouses being unable to find or sustain jobs matching their qualifications when relocating frequently. Each move requires finding new employment, but spouses often lack location-specific professional networks to access appropriate job opportunities. Research found over 50% of military spouses struggle to rebuild careers with each reassignment.

Landing a local job also takes time during which bills accumulate, pressing spouses to take the first available option rather than holding out for career-track roles. Financial considerations combined with employer reluctance to hire those perceived as transient drive many military spouses into underemployed situations.

Policies to Address Underemployment

Some governments have implemented programs to help mitigate military spouse underemployment. Initiatives like the U.S. Military Spouse Employment Partnership connect spouses to remote-friendly companies willing to hire across duty stations. The Military Spouse Career Coalition in Canada provides funding for spouses to obtain career-relevant credentials that are portable across provinces .

However, more systemic policy changes are needed. A recent study highlighted the need for greater license and degree reciprocity between states and countries to increase career portability for military spouses. Experts also recommend expanding remote work opportunities within government agencies to leverage military spouses' education and talents. Addressing underemployment remains a pressing issue to ensure military families' financial stability worldwide.

Policy Responses to Support Military Spouse Employment Globally

Governments and organizations around the world have implemented various policies and programs aimed at increasing workforce participation and career prospects for military spouses. These initiatives recognize military families' unique employment barriers related to frequent relocations and partner deployments. While progress has been made, experts emphasize more systemic interventions are needed to enable military spouses to attain productive and portable careers.

Western Countries

Several Western nations have established targeted policies and organizations to assist military spouses with employment. The United States offers career coaching through the Department of Defence's Military Spouse Employment Program. Career consultants advise spouses on in-demand skills, remote work options, and professional networking to unlock job opportunities.

The Military Spouse Employment Partnership in the U.S. also connects spouses to over 350 companies committed to hiring mobile military talent. Member firms have hired over 200,000 spouses to date. Similar national initiatives exist in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia focused on increasing private sector engagement in military spouse recruitment .

European Efforts

Some European governments mandate preferential hiring of military spouses in public sector jobs. Spain grants spouses priority status for civil service roles and offers relocation assistance for transfers. Denmark reserves certain teaching and government positions specifically for qualified military spouses as part of its descriptive representation model.

Germany's Federal Employment Agency provides job placement services tailored to military spouses, such as vocational assessments, paid training opportunities, and subsidies for companies hiring mobile spouses. These initiatives aim to open alternative pathways to stable public sector careers less susceptible to disruption from frequent moves.

Global Focus

International military spouse employment conferences like the Working Around the Globe summit foster global sharing of promising practices. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) issued recommendations pushing member countries to improve license portability and access to digital up-skilling for mobile spouses.

Global non-profits, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation and Blue Star Families, compile research on military spouse employment challenges to inform policy worldwide. Their advocacy helps elevate military families as a global workforce issue requiring coordinated multinational responses.

Future Outlook

Experts argue substantially more government commitment is needed globally to support military spouse employment through legislation and funding. Suggested policies include opening more remote work positions in public sectors, standardizing licenses across regions, and expanding subsidized childcare for families undergoing deployments or training periods.

There are also calls to mandate military transfer clauses in careers like nursing and teaching to protect spouses' tenure and seniority when moving. Addressing the underemployment of skilled military spouses remains a policy imperative yet to be fully tackled worldwide.

LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION AMONG INDIAN MILITARY SPOUSES

The situation of military spouses in India mirrors many of the challenges evident in other national contexts. However, India-specific cultural dynamics combined with less established policy supports produce distinct employment barriers for these families.

Employment Rates of Indian Military Spouses

Official labour force participation statistics for Indian military spouses are limited. However, smaller studies provide insights into the relatively low rates of formal employment among this population. Research suggests Indian military wives face even wider employment gaps compared to civilian counterparts than evident in Western military contexts. Cultural factors and lack of supportive policies emerge as major barriers restricting workforce engagement.

Formal Employment Rates

A 2020 survey of Indian Army families found just 26% of spouses were employed outside the home, compared to over 50% of military spouses in countries like the U.S. Studies on Indian Air Force families reveal similarly low rates, with only around 18-20% of spouses engaged in paid work outside the home.

Dominant sociocultural norms emphasizing domestic roles for women shape the low formal workforce participation among Indian military spouses, especially officers' wives. Over 80% of military wives surveyed identified as homemakers, reflecting expectations to focus on household and childcare duties. Frequent transfers every 1-2 years also disrupt ability to sustain steady careers.

Informal Employment

However, over 60% of Indian military spouses participate in some form of informal economic activity based out of the home. Social restrictions on women's mobility make home-based self-employment one of the few acceptable work avenues for officers' wives in particular. Teaching younger children, beauty services, handcrafts, and food catering are common flex-work activities.

Among junior ranks, financial necessity pushes more spouses into formal jobs, though still at relatively low rates. A study found 39% of junior rank spouses work outside the home, compared to just 22% of officers' spouses. But cultural disapproval limits professional roles deemed appropriate for officers' wives.

Geographic Challenges

Another barrier to formal employment is the geographic isolation of most military bases in India's remote cantonments. Cantonments have limited private sector presence, restricting viable job options for educated spouses. Lack of public transit in these areas also constrains spouses' mobility for work.

Frequent inter-state transfers between bases further hampers continuity in professional roles, as licenses and credentials often don't transfer between regions. Spouses report abandoning promising careers due to inability to re-license as teachers, nurses, etc in different states.

Overall, cultural restrictions and structural barriers significantly limit formal workforce engagement among Indian military spouses. Supplementary informal earning provides vital income but fails to leverage spouses' skills and education. Targeted policies to expand location-flexible work and career portability are needed to unlock this pool of underutilized talent.

Underemployment Among Indian Military Spouses

Similar to patterns globally, highly educated Indian military spouses often struggle with underemployment in roles below their qualifications. Frequent relocations combined with limited job prospects near isolated bases contribute to significant underutilization of skills among this group. Most military spouses are compelled to take up informal flex-work despite having specialized expertise and advanced degrees.

Prevalence of Underemployment

It is found in a study that in Indian army families 80% of spouses were working in low-skilled flexible jobs despite having college degrees, indicating high rates of underemployment. Surveys reveal over 90% of officers' spouses possess university qualifications, but few are able to find commensurate career opportunities. Often it is found that they all end up as teachers in primary and kindergarten schools while holding professional academic qualifications such as MBBS, LLM, BTech, BArch and even PhDs.

With frequent inter-state transfers, securing professional jobs that align with spouses' credentials poses an on-going challenge. Cantonment locations have limited private sector presence, restricting work options for educated spouses. Lack of credential portability across states also hampers continuity in fields like healthcare and education that require re-licensing.

Informal Flex-work

As a result, many qualified military spouses settle for informal flex-work out of necessity despite being overqualified. Home-based services like private tutoring, stitching classes or beauty parlours provide vital income but fail to leverage spouses' specialized expertise. Teaching basic subjects to children rather than working as schoolteachers exemplifies the underemployment reality for many spouses.

This deskilling contributes to financial instability in families given the low earnings potential of informal work. Yet lack of alternative local jobs, delays in re-licensing, and employer bias against transients leave few choices other than underemployed survival flex-work.

Impact on Wellbeing

Studies highlight the negative psychological impact of underemployment on military spouses including feelings of resentment, lowered self-esteem, and a sense of instability. Wives who previously had fulfilling professional careers report struggling with the identity adjustment and loss of financial independence.

Underemployment also exacerbates the sense of disruption and social isolation already common among military families relocated to new bases with no local connections. Supportive policies to mitigate underemployment could significantly improve wellbeing and financial conditions for military households.

Policy Recommendations

Experts emphasize more interventions are required to address Indian military spouse underemployment, including:

- Standardized national frameworks for credential licensing and transfers.
- Access to government jobs with mandatory transfer clauses.
- Expanded remote work opportunities in public sector roles.
- Dedicated online portals connecting mobile spouses to flex-work options.
- Concessional higher education programs to enable reskilling.
- Entrepreneurship grants and vocational training tailored for spouses.

Tackling underemployment requires recognizing military spouses as a high potential asset for India's economy, and implementing supportive policies accordingly.

Policy Responses to Support Indian Military Spouse Employment

Policies and programs to assist military spouses with employment remain limited in India compared to other countries. No centralized national initiatives exist, though local military spouse organizations provide some beneficial supports. Expanding structured policy interventions is crucial to enable greater workforce participation among this talent pool.

Current Status

India lacks national policies dedicated to expanding military spouse employment, unlike countries such as the U.S., Canada, and Australia. There are no centralized job assistance programs, skills training initiatives, or hiring incentives targeted for military spouses. This leaves families heavily dependent on informal community resources.

However, some local military spouse groups offer useful employment-related services on bases, including:

- Vocational training programs run by Army Wives Welfare Associations (AWWA) and Air Force Wives Welfare Associations (AFWWA) to develop in-demand skills and credentials for which Army Skill Training Centre has been opened to empower military spouses and widows by providing them with various skills accredited certification courses under

Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana.

- Informal job search forums hosted by military spouse clubs and ladies clubs to share openings.
- AWWA has come up with a new initiative where they provide a platform for entrepreneurs in the fraternity to showcase their products.
- Aahwan is a project under AWWA which was launched in the 2005, it provides a window of opportunity to widows and wives of soldiers to exhibit and sell their products.
- Local colleges reserving distance learning seats for spouses as enablers.
- Expanded higher education options through IGNOU, UGC distance programs.(AWES)
- Entrepreneurship guidance for home-based businesses under the 'AWWA Entrepreneurs'

These decentralized supports provide a starting point but lack the structure, scale, and resources for national impact.

Policy Recommendations

Expert studies emphasize expanded policy interventions by government are vital to boost military spouse employment in India. Suggested measures include:

- Standardized skills certification and licensing frameworks enabling seamless transfer across states.
- Mandating transfer clauses in certain public sector roles like teaching, healthcare.
- Dedicated online portals connecting military spouses to remote work opportunities..
- Access to low-cost government small business loans, incubators, start-up hubs.
- Partnerships with industry to open remote flex-work roles for spouses in fields like IT, finance, and customer service.
- Funding assistance for spouse career guidance programs on bases.
- Exploring reserved employment quotas in select government agencies.

A national level strategy, adequate investments, and stronger public-private coordination are vital to unlock the potential of this underleveraged talent pool.

Global Examples

India could adapt promising practices from other countries' military spouse employment programs:

- Career coaching, job search assistance provided through comprehensive initiatives like the U.S. Military Spouse Employment Program.
- Industry partnerships to recruit spouses into portable careers as done through the Military Spouse Employment Partnership.
- Government funding for license/credential fees, career training like Canada's Military Spouse Employment Grant.

Developing supportive policies tailored for Indian context would signify an important step towards workforce integration.

CONCLUSION

The review highlights the persistent challenges faced by military spouses in labour force participation across global contexts. Despite targeted policies in some countries, military spouses continue to experience lower employment rates and higher underemployment compared to their civilian counterparts. Frequent relocations and deployments inherent to military life disrupt career continuity, while structural barriers like credential transfer issues and geographic isolation exacerbate employment difficulties.

In Western nations, efforts have been made to address military spouse employment through initiatives like career counselling, job portals, and private sector partnerships. However, more comprehensive interventions are needed, such as expanding remote work opportunities, improving credential portability, and providing subsidized childcare during deployments.

In India, the situation is further compounded by cultural norms and expectations that restrict formal workforce engagement among military spouses, particularly for officers' wives. Structural barriers, including the isolation of military bases and lack of public transit, also limit employment prospects. While local initiatives offer vocational training and entrepreneurship guidance, centralized national policies and programs specifically targeting military spouse employment are lacking.

Experts emphasize the need for a dedicated national strategy in India, involving standardized licensing frameworks, access to remote work opportunities, small business support, and public-private partnerships. Recognizing military spouses as an underutilized talent pool and implementing supportive policies could significantly improve their workforce integration and financial stability.

Overall, addressing the employment challenges faced by military spouses globally remains an important policy imperative. Coordinated efforts involving government, industry, and military organizations are crucial to enable this mobile workforce to attain productive and portable careers, contributing to the well-being of military families worldwide.

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VijayaSri, a researcher, is exploring the intersection of ancient Indian knowledge and contemporary management principles. While deeply fascinated, she faces challenges due to the modern interpretations' limited scope. Pursuing a PhD in Management, she intends to bridge this gap by connecting insights from ancient Sanskrit texts with modern organizational behaviour concepts, focusing on areas like leadership and decision-making.

Beyond her role as an artist showcased in various art galleries, being an army wife has allowed VijayaSri to delve into India's diverse culture, sparking a profound interest in traditional perspectives. Influenced by her orthodox background, her curiosity about ancient Indian scriptures grew early. Studying Sanskrit texts, she found herself captivated by their profound insights into life, leadership, and purpose.

As a student of both Management and Sanskrit, VijayaSri seeks to seamlessly blend psychological and philosophical concepts from India's knowledge systems with contemporary organizational behaviour ideas. Her goal is to integrate this practical wisdom into present-day frameworks.

Balancing multiple passions including exploring Sanskrit texts, management theories, creating visual art, engaging with diverse cultures, and supporting India's military families—VijayaSri, driven by a sense of sacred duty, continues her mission to revive Indian knowledge for current and future business leaders and citizens.