Abstract

The masculine culture of military and the feminine attributes of women officers stand in total contrast to each other. The conundrum at the heart if this research is to analyse the experience of the Indian Air force women pilots in terms of transition of the gender-role identity and further how they negotiate their identity as a woman while performing highly masculine military role. Military provides an interesting ground to study gender identity and possibility for cultural change because it categorically rejects prevailing models of femininity. 12 Indian Air Force pilots (serving and retired) were interviewed utilizing in-depth interview technique. Findings indicated transition of gender role identity as these women begin to give a new meaning to their identity. While these women move away from the traditional femininity, they do not cease to recognize and explore their feminine side when needed. Indeed the Indian Air Force women pilots exemplify and redefine the culturally recognized definition of femininity. They craft a place where they appear to be enjoying the privileges of both the worlds and rise above the gender debate or biases.

Key words: Gender-role identity, femininity, transition, negotiation.
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Introduction

“Then….I wore a shirt and my Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored my womanliness. Dress in sarees be girl. Be wify, they said. Fit in. oh! Belong, cried the categorizer. It is time to choose a name, a role,”

(Das, 1965)

I did not join Air Force to prove to people what I was capable of but I choose it, for I wished to wear the military uniform one day. Being an army officer’s daughter I grew up in a typical military atmosphere and knew only one way of living- The military way. Finally I had a taste of my dream on 05 July 1997, when I earned the president’s commission after successfully completing the Air Force training (as an air traffic controller).

With uniform came huge responsibilities. I remember growing up quickly during this period. The training transformed me from a dependent and vulnerable girl to an independent Air Force officer. I was on my own, taking decisions, passing orders in some remote place matching every step with men. It was not easy, trying to ‘fit-in’ and learning the military culture but gradually with determination and persistence I found a place for myself in the overwhelming male dominated Indian Air Force. Those few years indeed changed me as a woman as I learnt to keep the gender aside.

Today I have many identities, I am a daughter, a wife and also a mother but I find my identity of an Air Force officer influencing all my identities profoundly. It is an integral part of me that will be reflected in everything concerning me. I feel privileged to have gone through this unique experience and will continue to draw inspiration and guidance from it.
Traditionally the Indian armed forces have been the sole realm of men. Although, women have been in the armed force since the inception of later, their role was restricted to medical or para medical services. Changes in the status of women in society, demographic needs, abstract notion of political correctness and the changing nature of warfare itself led to women making inroads in this male preserve in early nineties. This resulted in induction of women in non combatant roles in the three services i.e. Army, Air Force and Navy. In the Air Force the duties considered suitable for women included ground duties such as administration, Logistics and Education. This was followed soon by induction of women in flying branch (transport and helicopter) which marked their entry in combatant roles. Although, flying as a profession had not been alien to women, military aviation had different dimensions. Unlike civil aviation transport and helicopter flying in the air force stretches to landing at advanced landing grounds (ALGs) which are unprepared surfaces in hostile terrain, Para Dropping, special operations, casualty evacuation etc. Additionally, all these operations are carried out in adverse conditions of weather and available aids, and, if required in hostile territory. This requires high levels of skills and motivation. Inspite of the challenges of work, many women join the IAF in flying branch. Although the type of commission offered to women was only short service, which implies that they are engaged initially only for five years and for the pilots it was ten years (recently there is a debate about granting permanent commission to the women officers). In the Indian Air Force, the women who successfully clear their PABT (pilot aptitude battery test), service selection board and medical test are called at the Air Force Academy, Hyderabad for the training. The training which lasts for a year includes physical training, ground subjects and Basic
flying training. Other than these they are also expected to do drills, learn etiquettes and discipline of military life. After completing their basic flying training, they undergo Operational flying training on their representative aircraft (Helicopter or Transport) for a period of six months. They earn the president's commission at the end of these eighteen months.

**Gender Stereotype and women in the Military**

In the Indian Air Force the induction of women officers is generally understood as radically transforming traditional gender relations. Armed forces are not altered or changed to suit these women but these women are expected to suit the requirement of the military. An officer in the air force is expected to perform and deliver the duty regardless of gender. Women officer in any branch has the same role as her male counterpart. We can not deny that we associate our militaries with men and every military demands its personnel to have certain attributes like leadership, aggressive, ambitious, assertive, dominant, forceful and competitive and this holds good for the women officers also. The above characteristics are described as been masculine or the one which is culturally recognized as appropriate to men. According to gender stereotype, men and women differ on a number of psychological dimensions that are relevant for military performances. Bem, 1974, while describing gender stereotypes formulated an inventory popularly known as Bem’s Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) which categorizes characteristics of male and female stereotypes (Baron & Byrne, 2004). According to Broverman, Vogel, Clarkson & Rosenkrantz 1972; Diekman & Eagly 2000, typical men are believed to make decisions more easily and to be more independent, self-confident, competitive and leader-like than typical women. Typical women are believed to be more helpful, kind, gentle and emotionally expressive than men (Baron & Byrne, 2004). The gender-stereotypic
beliefs about women are in marked contrast to the attributes required of a successful performance as a soldier. Ebert & Hall, 1993 confirmed that psychological attributes required of a successful soldier are also stereotypic of men, whereas the stereotypic qualities possessed by women are explicitly rejected. The women who join armed forces are also expected to have these characteristics which are in contrast to their femininity. According to Heilman, 1983, “the discrepancy between stereotypic attributes of women and those required in the role of soldier may have a variety of effects on the experience of women in the military. The impact of stereotypic beliefs is additionally problematic for women because effective military performance requires the rejection of a number of stereotypically feminine qualities” (Boldry, Wood, Kashy, 2001, p. 689-690). This implies that the redefined role of women in military makes them go through a unique experience of performing masculine role by rejecting feminine attributes. Femininity is widely understood as standing in contrast to the requirement of becoming an officer in the Armed Forces.

**Understanding Femininity and Gender-Role Identity**

Femininity by dictionary definition means, having qualities or characteristics traditionally ascribed to women as sensitivity, delicacy or prettiness. Mahalik et al. (2003, 2005) define femininity as the degree of people’s conformity (emotional, cognitive, and / or behavioural) with a series of gender norms that designate what is considered socially appropriate for women, and which are transmitted by each culture and can be identified by the member of each society. According to Mahalik (2000), the construct “femininity is not a homogenous entity, but a multiple or multidimensional one – in other words there are different “femininities” with which women identify to different degrees. Therefore it becomes imperative to examine the
kind and the degree of femininity of the women pilots in the Indian Air Force who are confident to take up the masculine world.

Femininity is also defined as ‘characteristics of or appropriate or peculiar to women’ and our conclusion about what is or is not “appropriate” behaviour for others and ourselves are based on gender roles. Gender roles are the set of expectations, defined by a particular society that indicates what appropriate behaviour is for men and women. Connel (2002), in his book *Gender* states that “gender is, above all, a matter of the social relations within which individuals and groups act. Gender relations do include differences and dichotomy, but also include many other patterns. For instance, gender in the contemporary world involves massive hierarchies of power among men- as seen in multinational corporations, or armies”. However, if performing gender-role in culturally recognizable ways is crucial to the conception of one’s deepest self, as well as essential to forming meaningful interactions with others, the extent to which military women can adopt traditionally non-feminine behaviour and characteristics and still retain their identity as women may be called into question. Our culture approves gender identity only when it is perceived and experienced as natural, maintaining a sense of self would seem to require women to transpose civilian definitions of femininity that they have known all their lives to the military context – even when these definitions stand in direct opposition to the values of military culture.

**Femininity and military challenges**

Femininity and the military challenges stand in contrast to each other. Military challenges the femininity and encourages women to conduct in masculine manner. To justify and fit-in the role the women officers push their boundary of femininity and attempt recognizing with the masculine culture of military. This does not appear to be a simple process and one can not deny the gender-identity of these
women. How than these women extend existing boundaries of femininity with in the military context while maintaining their identities as a woman? Do women in their endeavour of securing credence in this predominant male set-up disinherit themselves from traditional female roles so they are accepted as one of them by the men? Or do they retain their femininity while experimenting with masculinity? The dynamics of the identity related to the femininity of these women is likely to emerge during the course of this research. The women in military challenge the widely accepted and understood concept of femininity. In order to understand how gender is reproduced, resisted or even transformed in the military setting one can take into account the explanation of Sewell (1992) as he uses the twin concepts of schemas and resources to explain both the general reproduction and occasional transformation of social life. (Silva, 2008).

**Learning Gender stereotype**

We bring up girls and boys in different ways and according to Bem, 1984, Eagly & Wood, 1999, as they grow older, sex typing occurs when they comprehend the “correct” stereotype associated with maleness and femaleness in their culture. Research of various kinds has shown convincingly that many “typical” masculine and feminine characteristics are in fact acquired (Baron & Byrne, 2004). The earliest information available to children regarding what it means to be female or male comes from their parents. Parents influence their children’s gender socialization both directly and indirectly via their interactions with their children, their gender attitudes, and the manner in which they model gendered behaviour (Paludi, 2004). By the age of about twenty when these girls join armed forces, sex typing has already occurred for them and performing military jobs comes across in total contrast to their femininity. Bem suggests that one way to decrease the likelihood that children will
develop gender schemas is to encourage children to be androgynous. Androgynous individual combine the psychological and behavioural characteristics thought typical of both sexes. Specifically, an androgynous individual might be forceful, assertive, and self-reliant (characteristics typically viewed by society as masculine) under certain circumstances and compassionate, gentle, and soft-spoken (characteristics typically thought of as feminine) when the situation calls for such behaviour. The concept of androgyy does not suggest that there should be no difference between men and women. Far from it: Advocates of androgyy propose that differences should be based on personal choices, freely made of the best human characteristics, and not on an artificial restricted inventory of characteristics deemed by society to be appropriate only for women or only for men.

**Transition and Negotiation of gender role-identity**

How are the traditional definition of femininity reproduced, and how are they modified or transformed? At the heart of these questions lie dominant cultural meanings of masculinity and femininity in Indian society. The military provides an interesting study for gender identity and possibility for cultural change because it categorically rejects prevailing models of femininity. What is the construct of femininity of these women who challenge or stretch their own boundaries and rise above the traditional role? How the journey of military flying transforms them and where do they find themselves after serving in the Indian Air Force? Most of these women who are flying military planes are married and have children. On the one hand they are in uniform performing their duty in the military set up and on the other hand they are also attending to their household and family. The contrast of the nature of roles played by them compels them to behave and perform like men and also be a woman when needed. What constitutes the femininity of such women who are not
hesitant to take up the masculine role at the same time not ready to give up the feminine role? The military provides an interesting case study for gender identity agency and the possibility for cultural change because it categorically rejects prevailing cultural understanding of femininity. Indeed, self control, assertiveness and determination combine to form a concept of soldier that is distinctly different from our cultural understanding of femininity as caring and compromising and when women experience the military life style than how does that impact their lives. The experience of military women officers is not only crucial but also valuable as it is rare and unique.
Fig 2.1: Conceptual map of the present study
Major research concern

To study the transition and negotiation of gender-role identity of the Indian Air Force women pilots.

Specific research questions

a. To study the transition of gender-role through the experience of women pilots of the Indian Air Force.

b. To explore through the experience of the women pilots of the Indian Air Force as to how they negotiate their gender-role identity.

Paradigmatic frame of the study

Research paradigm or the philosophical concept that is best suited to understand the present study is social constructivism. Constructionism became prominent in the U.S with Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s 1966 book, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger and Luckmann argue that all knowledge, including the most basic, taken-for-granted common sense knowledge is derived from and maintained by social interactions. Social constructivism is sociological theory of knowledge that considers how social phenomena or objects of consciousness develop in social contexts. Social constructs are generally understood to be by-products of countless human choices rather than laws resulting from divine will or nature. A major focus of social constructivism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social reality. It involves looking at the ways social phenomena are created, institutionalized, known, and made into tradition by humans. Social constructivism is one of the main schools of thoughts in the constructivist theory of education. This theory has been developed and supported by many educational theorists like Kenneth Gerger and John Dewey. The basic principal behind social constructivism according to Gerger, 1995, is that the
knowledge is constructed through social interacts, and is the result of social process (Teague, 2000). The social construction of reality is an ongoing, dynamic process that is reproduced by people acting on their interpretations and their knowledge of it. Similarly, this study attempts to explore the dynamics of gender role identity of women pilots in the social context and how new knowledge is constructed as they interact with and within a social context. As they are exposed to different experiences, new knowledge is formed and the knowledge is strengthened when it is successfully used in wider environment.

The theoretical perspective that explains this is the **social role theory** by Eagly, Wood & Dickman, 2000 and according to this theory, differences in men’s and women’s behaviour are a function of the different roles men and women hold in our society. It is not specific people that shape behaviour, but societal role structures that influence behaviour (Baron & Byrne, 2004). There are other roles that men and women occupy in society besides work and family roles that influence gender-role behaviour. For example, men are more likely than women to occupy military roles and athletic roles and that is why when women join military than it is seen as different from the role they are expected to perform. **Gender-role theory** given by Eagly and Steffen, 1986 argues that we associate war with maleness and avoiding the war with lack of masculinity. According to this theory performing gender related roles is essential part of one’s identity. Gender identity is referred here as the degree to which an individual identifies himself or herself with masculine and feminine personality traits. Three psychological theories exist about how we acquire gender identity. The first, which is often referred to as biological determinism argues that femininity and masculinity follow inevitably from our physical differences as males and females. The second, known as social learning theory claims that we acquire the relevant
masculine and feminine skills by imitating others and adapting our own conduct and attitudes while the third, cognitive developmental theory, maintains that masculinity and femininity develop through a process of interaction between our experiences of the world and our emerging but pre-structured capacity for conceptual thinking. From the theory of gender role socialization, traditionally, it has been assumed that men and women receive different gender role socialization (Bem 1993: Konard, Rithie, Lieb & Corrigal 2000). Men undergo a socialization process whereby they develop masculine characteristics and initiative that enable them to be successful in work environment whereas women develop feminine characteristics such as nurturance and expressing feelings as they predominate in caretaking roles.
Literature Review

The experience of Indian armed forces with regard to women is new and there are few researches done in this area but there has been an extensive research done in the western countries and some of these studies are applicable to the present research. To understand the concepts like gender-role identity, gender stereotypes, femininity and the role of women in military, relevant studied were reviewed. Since this study focuses on gender-role identity as understood in the social context, several studies were reviewed to comprehend and appreciate its significance in relation to an individual.

Gender identity and gender-role identity

Silva (2000), conducted a research to explain how female ROTC (Reserve officers cadet corps) cadets negotiate the tension between masculine military culture and traditionally femininity. The main concern was to answer how women negotiate gender identities with in the ‘masculine’ military institution and what type of transformation does this negotiation entails. The finding of this study suggested that gender does not emerge out as the only identity of these women and there is more to their identity than just the gender. Women respondent of this research often contradicted themselves as they negotiated femininity within the military sphere and hence the complexity of their situation surfaced indicating various aspects of the identity of the women in military. One crucial finding was that all women in the sample understood ROTC culture as an opportunity to be strong, assertive, and skilful and also as an escape from some of the negative aspects of traditional femininity and also their chance to prove their worth based on their capability rather than sex. ROTC is viewed as gender-blind in which women could excel as individuals and broaden their horizon and even redefine traditional definition of femininity. While most of the
respondents of the research conceived ROTC as a space for resisting civilian gender norms, they simultaneously embraced the traditional meaning of femininity like attractiveness, sensitivity and motherhood. It was further revealed these women challenge the notion of masculinity and femininity. The rough routine, rigorous physical training, using weapons and presenting their bodies in a non sexual ways stands in contrast to the cultural understanding of women as weak and passive. Ultimately these women enjoy the privileges of the masculine world without giving up femininity. Thus military qualifies as an interesting opportunity for understanding the dynamics of women in uniform.

**Gender stereotypes and career-related attitudes**

Oswald (2008) demonstrated the theoretical and practical importance of gender stereotype on woman’s career-related attitudes. The aim of this study was to find how gender stereotypes influence women’s liking for traditionally masculine and feminine occupations. The study found that women in the gender stereotype-salient condition reported higher levels of interest in, and perceived ability to succeed in, feminine-typed occupations than did the more weakly identified women. The women who did not hold gender central to their identity were less susceptible to gender stereotypes. The findings of this research explained how gender stereotypes influence women’s attitudes that are important when choosing careers. Even when women choose a non traditional career, stereotypes might play a role in the choice to leave the field. Oswald & Harwey (2003) found that, it is important educators and parents take protective steps to reduce the salience of gender stereotypes and that these efforts can have negative implications for women’s career aspiration. Gender-stereotype is seen as a reason for women to choose and pursue occupations that are gender traditional rather than non traditional. The findings of the study were significant as how gender
stereotype is related to the choice and liking for a particular occupation can be understood by analysing the intensity with which women identify with their gender and further can be connected to women in the military. The number of women making a non traditional career choice has increased rapidly in the recent past. Tiwari and Ghaddially (2009), conducted a study to analyse the changing gender identity of emerging adults and concluded girls to be more sex-typed than boys and this is probably the result of economic and societal changes taking place in Indian society as an increasing number of women are going to higher education and taking up employment roles and in this study it was also seen that the daughters have moved away from traditional personality traits towards non-traditional ones more than mothers. This is probably because daughters are willingly taking up employment in male dominated fields which require masculine personality traits and they are also under pressure to acquire feminine traits as demanded by their parents so that they are successful in their marital life. Overall the daughters were observed to have moved away from traditional personality traits more than their mothers. This can be seen as a significant shift of the traditional role of the women in Indian society. But choosing an occupation and being part or pursuing the same profession are two different things. Women can choose a non traditional occupation like military but how they identify themselves with the military culture is worth finding out. Dr. Radhakrishnan (2006) in his attempt to understand the role and the reality of women in the Indian Armed Forces found that women officers are marginal to the male dominated masculine culture of the services. These women are pushed to the periphery of the male dominated military and simultaneously they have disassociated with their own gender on account of a non traditional career choice. This study claimed that women officers in their endeavour to carve a niche in this male set up move away from traditional
female roles but even after constant trying, they are still struggling to be completely accepted. Women bearing arms are seen as imbibing masculine values which is in conflict with expected social pattern of feminine behaviour thus creating further confusion about their identity. So the question is what is the construct of the identity of women in the Indian Armed Forces?

**Role conflict**

Malhotra and Sachdeva (2005) demonstrated that women in professions with low level of perceived social recognition would experience more role conflict than those in professions with high level of perceived recognition. We can thus conclude that the women pilots in the Indian Air Force is regarded by the society as prestigious and thus such women face less role conflict when compared to their other counterparts who are nurses or teachers. These women are not so tightly governed by the rules of the society and society is not too harsh on them as they are seen to be in profession with high level of perceived social recognition. As understood women in military are burdened to take up the masculine military role and it can be stressful as women have variety of other tasks which they have to attend to like household chores and nurturance. To find the effects of stress on job functioning of military men and women Bray, Camlin, Fairbank, Dunteman and Wheeless conducted a study and found that women perceive more family-related stress than men and which is related to the level of responsibility entrusted upon them. Women are overloaded with the child care or household duties with also the tough military duty to perform which in turn leads to the role conflict or role overload. Although the cause of the stress was not very evident in this research but can be attributed to the features of military life and the challenge of competing in a predominantly male organization. Despite their endeavour to prove themselves there are disparities when it comes to evaluating the
performance of women. Boldry, Wood and Kashy (2001) documented the effects of
gender stereotypes on evaluations of women in the male-dominated environment of
military training. The finding revealed that in comparison to stereotypic females,
stereotypic male cadets were judged to possess more of a cluster or attributes
associated with motivation, including dedication, physical fitness and diligence.
Stereotypic male cadets also were judged to possess more leaders like qualities than
females, including leadership and self-confidence. The pattern of findings further
suggests that the impact of stereotypic beliefs in military setting is problematic for
women because of the discrepancy between the attributes that comprise the social
stereotype of women and the attributes required for effective military performance. It
was further concluded that the negative impact of feminine qualities were apparent in
the military context as greater femininity was associated with less leadership. Thus
women were evaluated as less deserving in the military set up. More a woman is
close to femininity, the less likely that she would be considered suitable in a military
role. The study concluded that sex remains an important distinguishing characteristic
among cadets in military training. This implies that no matter how hard one tries, the
gender becomes a basis of one’s evaluation and we do have preconceived notions
attached to gender which facilitates this evaluation. Instead of making judgement
based on the performance, we start by first going by the popular notions and thus
colour the evaluation. Women in the military are bound to be evaluated on such basis
which assumes femininity as undesirable attribute in Armed Forces. In their attempt
to measure masculinity and femininity by using BSRI (Bem sex rating inventory),
Lubinski, Tellengaen and Butcher (1983) define femininity as being primarily related
to a cluster of variables that can be labelled as “nurturance-warmth”. Masculinity on
the other hand, was defined by a cluster of variables reflecting “dominance-poise” and
androgyny is viewed as a distinct concept which is a blending of both the masculine and feminine traits. Women in male dominated organizations probably fall into the bracket of androgyny as they also relate to certain masculine traits while indulging in femininity. Lopez, Florence Dresch and Garcia (2009) described femininity as a multidimensional construct made up of diversity of gender norms that, although related, are independent and claim femininity to be a psychological concept which can be measured. They understood femininity as having more to it than just a list of few traits. Femininity should not be understood as simply as it is described as femininity means and is interpreted in many different ways. Femininity is seen with respect to a particular society and the very meaning of femininity in different cultures can be different. Keeping this in mind the meaning of femininity for the women in the Indian Air Force will be interesting to explore.

**Personality & background characteristics**

Personality and background characteristics of women in male-dominated occupations were examined through a study conducted by Lamkau (1983). This research on background characteristics of women in the male-dominated occupations revealed several themes. As children these women tended to have opportunity to explore and develop independently, to witness a wide range of male and female models, and to receive higher education. Open encouragement and support of achievement, education and androgynous exploration of “masculine” as well as “feminine” endeavours, within a stable family situation characterized the reports of these women. The common theme which emerged during the course of the above study suggests that women in male-dominated occupations were exposed to a variety of experiences and they were encouraged and supported by their parents to achieve without any gender limitations and the maternal employment was found to be very
high in case of these women suggesting that employment of mothers does encourage women to take up career in male-dominated organizations. On evaluating personality characteristics one of the outstanding trend that emerged from the literature is the prevalence of the competency traits that are stereotypically assigned as typical and ideal for men – independence, assertiveness, rationality, etc. This trend was evident in a series of studies by Bachtold and Werner (1974), in which samples of women in various occupations were compared with each other and with men in comparable occupations.

**Attitude towards women in the military**

To assess the role of group affiliation and gender on attitudes towards women in the military, Matthew, Ender, Laurence and Rohall conducted a research to check the hypothesis that military cadets are less approving of women being assigned to a broad array of military jobs than are civilian college students. There was less approval for women serving in roles more synonymous with more risk of combat such as hand-to-hand combat soldier, air defence gunner, combat ship crew member and fighter pilot. The result supported the hypothesis as military cadets were found to be less approving of women involved in military jobs as compared to college students. This research also brings forth the attitude of men towards women in militaries. Despite facing difficulty in acceptance of their role in the military, women are not deterred to take up the challenges of military life and there are young enthusiastic women who are ready to done this new avatar while also finding their identity in it.

**Changing role of women (breaking the barrier)**

Marwaha (2006) in her paper explores the role of women in ushering change through the process of recognizing her potentiality through the process of self development and enhancing her sense of self. The demands on women help make her
develop the skill of multi tasking as women attend to variety of tasks. The main emphasis of this paper is that, women can and have the capability to take decisions and need not be like men to prove that she has the potential. Women can possibly do everything that men do by retaining their feminine sensibility. Maybe that is the reason why women continue to perform and prove their mettle even in an arena like Armed Forces which is seemingly a male domain with masculine values. This paper aims to inspire women to be the change that they wish to see in others and not hesitate to explore their potential. Women in the Armed Forces are the most appropriate example of how today’s women extent and stretch their boundaries and aim to achieve and take control of their lives. As long as women are committed to upholding gender as a system of differentiation – and the superiority of masculinity therein – their ability to transform the hierarchal structure of gender in meaningful ways will remain limited.

Significance of the study

Women in uniform have always been a topic of discussion not only because of their choice of profession but also because people are curious to know about their experiences in the male dominated masculine culture of services. Keeping this in the background when through this research we attempt to explore the femininity of the women pilots of the armed forces, we are sure to identify new aspects of femininity. As we gain insight into their world we will be able to appreciate gender stereotype-shift if it is happening. Since so far no research has been done related to the identity of the Indian air force women pilots thus this would be a pioneer in this field and can contribute towards encouragement to conduct more research hence forth. It will be interesting to understand different facets of this intriguing aspect of ones identity which is possible to emerge in the course of the study. Nevertheless, this study would
also help us understand the identity of women who are involved in masculine jobs. Through this study we can also appreciate how constructs like femininity and masculinity are socially constructed and are changing with time.
Methodology

The proposed study is conducted using a qualitative approach. Qualitative research, broadly defined, means “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.17) and instead, the kind of research that produces findings arrived from real-world settings where the “phenomenon of interest unfold naturally” (Patton, 2001, p.39). Qualitative research methods often address broad and complex problems rather than the concise hypotheses found in quantitative applications. As this research intends to explore the subjective experiences of the women pilots thus a qualitative study is most suitable and will also help understand the dynamics of gender identity which is the focus of this research. The aim is to explore the quality of the experience of these women which can be best understood and explained by approaching this research through employing qualitative methods.

Sample

The population from which the sample for this study is drawn is women who are serving as well as the ones who have served in the Indian Air Force as a pilot between the age of 25-35. Population is estimated to be close to 70 in number. Sample size is 12. Selecting a sampling technique in relation to qualitative methods were identified as being less clear cut, but still influenced by the power of numbers (Cassell, Buehring, Symon, Johnson & Bishop, 2005). The sample size was initially decided to be flexible between 10 to 15 depending upon as and when we are satisfied with the quality of data obtained. The sample size of 12 has not been arrived with a specific rationale but rather it is found to be credible and representative to the audience. Sampling technique used is purposive and also snowball. Purposive sampling has been utilized to reach the targeted sample as it was found to be feasible
in terms of the resources and time available. Snowball technique was further used to include participants to reach the desired number as there was a requirement to reach to the women pilots posted to Air Force stations all over the country.

**Process**

**Inclusion and Exclusion criteria:**

- Women pilots who are married (including widowers) and have spent minimum of two years of active flying in the Indian Air Force will be included.
- Women pilots who are retired will also be included in the sample.
- Women pilots who are also mothers will be encouraged to participate.

**Data collection**

In–depth interview which is a type of semi-structured interview was the primary method for collecting data. This extremely popular form of interviewing keeps the procedure informal yet an interview guide is used to provide an outline of topics to be covered and as the natural conversation flows there is freedom for the participants to explore their own thoughts, and flexibility of the interviewer in selecting the aspects of the interview to be followed. Depth interviews were conducted with the women pilots using an interview guide. Interview guide was prepared keeping in mind the major research concern and the specific questions. The process of data collection can be divided into two phases:

**Phase 1:**

Air Force Station Yelahanka (Bangalore) was approached, as it is a transport base with two operational squadrons. The women pilots were contacted and briefed about the research and its purpose. Their willingness to be part of the research was obtained and as per their convenience and availability the interview sessions were
planned. A letter addressed to the Air Headquarters, Delhi was also sent describing the purpose and the methodology of the research.

**Phase 2:**

Interviews were conducted as per the schedule. Each participant was briefed about the ethical norms and was made to sign informed consent form. All interviews were tape recorded with prior permission from the participants. The interviews were informal and the approach was conversational. Field notes for each interview were taken wherever necessary. Each participant was also asked to give details of more women pilots who would be interested to cooperate in the research. Since most of the participants are flying to different places frequently and were not able to give time for face to face interviews, few were interviewed through telephone. To reach the target sample size it was required to include women pilots from the Air Force Stations other than Bangalore also. Serving and the retired women pilots from other Indian Air Force bases were also approached and interviewed.

**Data Analysis**

The data was in the form of the interview tape recordings. The data was carefully transcribed and thematic analysis was used to code the entire data (transcript).

**Thematic analysis**

The method used to analyze the data gathered from these interviews is thematic analysis. Constant Comparative Analysis is a general approach from which several qualitative analytic strategies gather logic. Originally developed for use in grounded theory methodology of Glaser and Strauss, this strategy involves taking one piece of data (one interview, one statement one theme) and comparing it with all others that may be similar or different in order to develop conceptualizations of the possible relations between the various pieces of data. Naturalistic enquiry, thematic
analysis and interpretive descriptions are the methods that depend on constant 
comparative analysis to develop ways to understand the human phenomena within the 
context in which they are experienced.

Thematic Analysis is a process commonly found in qualitative research in 
which the researcher identifies the pattern found in data and categorizes the data by 
themes (Aronson, 1994; Gibson, 2006; Tere, 206). While in the process of 
interviewing the participants there are a lot of ideas that emerge and these ideas can 
be best understood and analysed with thematic analysis. This method focuses on 
identifiable themes of living and/or behaviours. This type of analysis is highly 
inductive, that is, themes emerge from the data and not imposed on the data by the 
researcher. There is also a possibility that researcher’s observations of the 
participants might emerge as a theme. These observations, if found valid when 
compared with the data in the interviews, can also be considered as themes.

Validating the Data

Validity is crucial for the credibility of the research. To ensure the validity the 
following methods were employed

Reflexivity

This is used to reduce the influence of one's own subjectivity into the research. 
It is an ongoing process, where the researcher goes back to his work and examines if 
at all his beliefs, ideas, interests or experience has added colour to the research. As 
explained by Carla Willig, this involves reflecting upon ways in which our own 
values, experience, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life have 
shaped our research. My own experience of having served in the Indian air force can 
inefluence this research, thus I used reflexivity as a tool to reduce the effects of my 
subjectivity. I maintained a diary to keep day to day record and going through it
helped to reflect on my subjectivity. Few of the participants whom I have known from before were likely to influence me and also could be more casual in their interview sessions thus I constantly checked myself and also reminded the participants to take the interview session seriously as their input is crucial to the final findings of the research and in turn to the women in the Air Force and also the organization.

**Multiple coding**

It concerns the same issue as the quantitative equivalent “inter-rater reliability” and is a response to the charge of subjectivity sometimes levelled at the process of qualitative data analysis. Although it does not usually demand complete replication of results, it does involve the cross checking of coding strategies and interpretation of data by independent researchers. The greatest potential of multiple coding lies in its capacity to furnish alternative interpretations and thereby to act as the “devil’s advocate” implied in many of the checklists in alerting researchers to all potentially competing explanations. I used multiple coding for validating the data with the help of my guide who checked each and every coding.

**Peer debriefing**

Peer debriefing is a useful and a convenient method of validating the data. The invaluable debrief given by my friends (Rajeshwari & Shilpa) and my husband (an Air Force pilot) helped me in validating the data and the concepts at various stages. After completing the collection and analysis of the data the result and the discussion based on the data was explained in detail.
Result and Discussion

As widely understood, military services of any nation operates on highly masculine traits of its personnel, as the very nature of military is masculine. While women joining Armed Forces are generally seen as radically transforming gender stereotypes, it also provides an opportunity to analyse and study the gender role identity of these women. The entire process of training and serving in the military is bound to have an impact on the lives and the personality of these women as their gender identity (woman) and the role identity (military officer) stand is contrast to each other. This study attempts to analyse the process of transition of women in the military from traditional gender role identity to non-traditional identity.

The conundrum at the heart of this research is to study the transition of gender role identity that occurs when women break new grounds by taking up the challenges of a non traditional career as military flying. There are distinct contributing factors which appear to be contributing from early years.

Table 4.1: Shows the global theme, organizing themes and sub themes about transition of gender-role identity of Indian Air Force women pilots

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### Identity of the Indian Air Force Women Pilots

#### 2. Transition of Gender Role Identity

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1.2.4 Sports and NCC as Catalyst
1. Facilitating Non-Traditional Career Choice

'No it was not the novelty, and it was not the danger
and the adventure (although these had their charm). It
was certainly not a passing whim (if it had been the hard
work would have dispelled it in a very short time!). I
think there were three chief reasons for my choice of career.
First, a real love for and interest in aviation. Secondly, a
determination to earn my own money and make my career
a paying proposition. Thirdly, a conviction that aviation was
profession of the future and therefore had room to welcome
its new followers.'

(Gower, 1975)

On analysing the data it was evident that the early growing up experience
contributes towards motivating certain girls to choose non-traditional career choice
like military flying. The exposure these women get during early years facilitate the
decision to opt for military as a serious career. Factors such as inspiration drawn
from parental figure, strong fascination for flying and the zeal to achieve different and
difficult career goals draws them towards non-traditional career of military flying. In
other factors, the role of the family in terms of the support they provide and validate
the individual’s action is crucial. Parent’s employment, parenting style and
participation in the sports and NCC acts as catalyst and hence strengthen the self
believe of these women. On analysing the data we are not only in the position to
appreciate the transition that occurs but are also able to closely describe the various
factors facilitating non-traditional career choice.
Fig 4.1: The Thematic Network for Global Theme of Facilitating Non-Traditional Career Choice
1.1 Early Experiences

The early experiences appear to be contributing towards drawing these women to non-traditional career choice. Pattern from the data indicated certain critical factors that facilitate choosing a non-traditional career.

1.1.1 Idolizing parental figure

Women in the male dominated culture of military tend to come from families where father is himself military personnel. Many of the participants in the sample are from defence background and have grown up idolising their fathers and in turn idolise the uniform or vice versa. The father is looked upon as some one who is in total command, has power and is hugely respected for the services that he renders to the nation. Father in the military uniform is a status symbol and as children these women are highly influenced by the father figure. Meszaros, Burger & Creamer, 2005 came up with the findings that in addition to family influences, women in the male dominated professions identified significant others in their lives who influenced their career decision (as cited by Lemkau, 1983). Further, it was found that interaction with fathers, brothers, and other male figures prepared them for a career in male-dominated field. Similarly it is seen in this study that there is a high degree of influence of the father in uniform on the most of the participants. An IAF pilot and a daughter of an IAF pilot exemplified this argument as:

“I am from the service background. My dad was in the Air Force. He was a pilot himself and he flew the avro… I was certain that I wanted to be a pilot in the Air Force again I was influenced by my father, whom I saw every day…”

(Personal communication, July 15, 2010)
This idolisation that these women have for their father in uniform, very naturally gets converted into a wish to see oneself also in the uniform. Men in the military are identified with incredible set of qualities and the very reason that these girls perceive their father as an amalgamation of all the possibly good qualities in a man, makes them an object of admiration right from their childhood, and so strong is that initial impression that it continues to influence their thinking throughout their lives and decisions. Having served for ten years in the IAF, one of them whose father too served in the IAF described her experience as:

“It was only my father who inspired me. Had the craze for the Uniform; always. I felt it was the power of the uniform. My dad was a warrant office and the fascination he had for the forces was unbelievable.”

(Personal communication, July 24, 2010)

The concept of self-authorship, a constructivist developmental framework first developed by Kegan (1994) and extended by Magolda (1998, 1999). Self-authorship is the ability to reflect upon one’s beliefs, organize one’s thoughts and feelings in the context of, but separate from, the thoughts and feelings of others, and literally make up one’s own mind. Self-authorship is a complex phenomenon involving three dimensions: (a) cognitive, (b) interpersonal, and (c) intrapersonal. The cognitive dimension is what people believe and how they make meaning and judgments. The interpersonal dimension is how people view the opinions of others in relationship to their own judgments. Identity or an internal sense of self is the intrapersonal dimension. We advance Magolda’s conceptualization of self-authorship in two important ways. First, we look at how self-authorship applies to the way adult women describe critical incidents in their past associated with their choice of a career in a
non-traditional field. Second, it is not only educational experiences that promote self-authorship, the focus but also parents and significant others who play a crucial role in the development of self-authorship in young women.

1.1.2 Fascination

Most of the women in the sample agreed to have certain degree of fascination for the aeroplanes. Fascination is a strong factor linked to interest and it is the state of being intensely interested in something. For fascination to begin, it is important to be exposed to that object of fascination and as for the women coming from the Air Force background the exposure to aeroplanes and other things related to aviation is evident right from their childhood days. But fascination was also reported by women coming from other backgrounds. A 26 years old IAF pilot described her fascination as following:

“This is by chance, when I went to the school, the airport was on the way. Then somehow I got attracted to the aeroplanes and when I saw this option I just applied.”

(Personal communication, July 15, 2010)

Fascination can be viewed in terms of doing something new and there is a level of excitement related to that fascination. Another woman described her fascination in terms of novelty of the idea that a woman can wear the uniform and fly in tough military scenario.

“It sounded very different at that time, you know it was some fifteen years ago what I am talking about here. This was so new and the very thought of doing something like this excited me and I was certain if it ever does happen I am going to join Air Force.”

(Personal communication, Aug 9, 2010)
Fascination is the single most powerful means of persuading and influencing behaviour and it is evident from the experience of these women that most of them were at some stage in their lives fascinated by aeroplanes or flying. Fascination can be seen as a powerful motivational factor that contributes in a career choice. We are aware that we can not always obtain the goals that we desire. There is a expectancy-value model of incentive theory of motivation which explains that one’s motivation to pursue a particular course of action will depend on two factors, one is expectancy (one’s chances of attaining the incentive) and second is value of the desired incentive. Here, we can say that fascination means that one has a huge value of that goal. Thus fascination has the potential to motivate.

1.1.3 Expectations

Most of the women in the sample endorsed military culture as an opportunity of doing some thing different and this inclination of doing something which is non-traditional in nature drives these women to enter a field where the level of adventure is considerably high. One of the women who exemplify this argument explained:

“The out going nature of mine and I always wanted to do some thing different. I always did different things like I also could drive a bus and tractor in my village. For anything else I wouldn’t have joined Air Force but for flying as I saw myself doing something different.”

(Personal communication, July 23, 2010)

They spoke enthusiastically about their expectations from the Air Force. They expected Air force life to have thrill, discipline and away from monotony. This is how they wanted their lives to be and describe it as “the way of living”. Some women especially the ones coming from non-military background, found the military
life to be a little different from what they had expected it to be, as most of them thought it to only concentrate on the flying training. The level of physical training and the other military training came as a bit of surprise to them. The women coming from military background had a fair idea of the life ahead and one of them described it as:

“I had a very realistic picture frankly. I didn’t have a rosy picture and knew the negative side also…I knew what I was in for. I knew the demands of this profession so had a very realistic idea. I was pretty aware of all that and it did not disappoint me. I knew I was in for some action oriented life…I knew I would not be having a predictable life everyday. I will be thrown with challenges everyday. I knew it will be an up hill task being a female but this is what I expected it to be.”

(Personal communication, July, 16 2010)

The willingness to take up the challenges and confidence to take up the military role motivates them to opt for non-traditional profession. Clearly, these women expect something different in life and they think that their expectations can be full filled by joining military flying. They are the set of women who believe in not ordinary but indulging in something daring. This expectation from the life makes these women stand away from the other women right from the very beginning. One of the women pilot’s perception of the Air Force captures this sentiment:

“It was perceived as risky, something daring and something totally different”

(Personal communication, July 27, 2010)

This can be further explained by taking in account the concept of self-efficacy: as originally proposed by Bandura, self-efficacy expectations refer to a person’s
beliefs concerning his or her ability to successfully perform a given task or behaviour. Self-efficacy is not viewed as a trait, nor is it viewed as a global personality characteristic. Rather, it is a specific cognitive judgement made with regard to specific task, behaviour, choice, or course of action. Strength of self-efficacy expectations refers to how confident an individual is in his or her expectations of succeeding at a given task or course of action. All the participants in the study believed that they have the capability and the enthusiasm to take up the pressure of the military flying. They all were confident of succeeding and making a good military personnel and this displayed their strength of self-efficacy which is an important factor when one makes a career choice keeping in mind the expectations or the requirement of that particular profession.

1.2 Career Decision

While analysing the factors facilitating career decisions, some pattern emerge indicating the impact of the family on the participants. Role of the family in terms of the support, the authoritarian parenting style and also the involvement in sports and NCC appeared to be some key factors facilitating a non-traditional Career Choice which contributes in the direction of transition of gender-role identity.

1.2.1 Role of the Family

Here we understand the role of the family in terms of support and apprehensions related to their daughter’s career decision. The career choice that adolescents make is a decision that is influenced not only by their development but also by the context in which they live according to Chen, 1997 (as cited be Lemkau, 1983). Thus the role of the family is an important aspect. All the participants reported that their fathers were extremely supportive of them and encouraged their daughters to take up the challenges of the military life. It was observed that few participants
received some kind of apprehension from their mothers. Some participants described their mother’s reactions displaying apprehension and doubt. One of the participants described her mother’s apprehension as:

“But once I had a job in the engineering, my mother was a little apprehensive. She said you have a good job; you are close to home, you are close to me ….why don’t you just stay with me.”

(Personal communication, Aug 5, 2010)

As compared to fathers, mothers surfaced their anxiety about their daughter’s non-traditional choice of career. Their main concern was regarding the risk involved, going away from home to a remote area and living in a male-dominated military culture. They appeared to be not comfortable with the idea that their daughters will be away in some place surrounded mostly by men and on top of that taking the risk of flying a military plane every day. They assumed that joining military would push their daughters in a world where women are marginal and away from stereotypic role which actually stresses the point that doing gender is essential to each of us and it also surface the cultural notion of gender role identity. This is again is highly influenced by the socio-culture of the country in context. Mothers are not only concerned for the security of their daughters but at the same time worried how the masculine culture of military will impact her life and further how her daughter will ‘fit-in’ the popular culturally recognized attributes of women in the society. Mothers were seen to later accept their daughter’s choice of career and gradually came in terms with the idea and supported them. The support of parents gives these women the confidence to decide on a male-dominated career. Parents validate their career choice by extending support to them, which leads to self-believe and enthusiasm to take up the challenging military role.
1.2.2 Parenting Style

Women in military provide an interesting platform to study the parenting style that encourages women to opt for male-dominated profession. All the 12 participants reported to have had a very liberal and non-discriminating upbringing. The parenting style these women received was clearly authoritative. According to Baumrind’s (1967, 1971) typology of parenting styles, parents can be perceived to be authoritarian, permissive or authoritative. Authoritative parents encourage their children’s development of autonomy and they rely on explanations of rules instead of strict punishment. Children reared under authoritative parenting are willing to engage in exploratory behaviour, are more self-reliant and are academically motivated. Definitely the parenting style has contributed in some way to their career choice. Since their parents gave them freedom of choice and expression thus these women explored themselves in every possible way and knew exactly what they wanted to do. They choose to be different and this self confidence can be attributed to the kind of parenting they were exposed to. While talking about her parents, one of the participants gave the details of her parent’s parenting style as:

“My parents were very open minded people…they brought us up with an open attitude in terms of education and career opportunities. They gave us enough space to grow.”

(Personal communication, Aug 5, 2010)

One interesting pattern observed was that most of the participants came from the families where girls were more in number. Most of the participants reported to have sisters. Out of 12, 8 of them had only sisters or were the only child. This pattern was so prominent that it was imperative to analyse this phenomenon. The most
remarkable data on sibling status come from Hennig’s (1973) study of women business executives; she found that all were firstborns and not a single one had a brother (as cited by Lemkau, 1967). Helson found a similar trend for mathematicians to have few brothers, having no siblings or only female siblings. In an attempt to answer the question that why women having sisters show keenness in joining male dominated profession, it was observed that in such families girls were brought up like boys and absence of a son in the family somewhere made them do all the things that a boy normally does. One participant shared her experience as:

“My parents were very –very broad minded from very beginning

and that is why I am here. They never considered me as their daughter.

I used to be like their son and probably we didn’t have one brother, so

that was probably one of the major reason why my parents treated

me as their son.”

(Personal communication, July 25, 2010)

These women grew up seeing themselves doing everything that boys do and this strengthens their self-belief and in later years when they have to make a career choice then they don’t hesitate to enter fields like military which is overwhelmingly male dominated. Their non traditional career choice confirms their belief that they are capable of performing like men and can be military personnel. When there are only girls in the family then you grow up without much comparison and there is no brother who is in contrast to you. This way you have a wider range to experiment.

1.2.3 Parent’s Employment

The data collected indicated that 11 out of 12 had their fathers as government employee (6 being in the military). Only one came from a total civilian (business) family. The fathers had a good educational background and were well established in
their respective careers. Contrary to few studies that suggest that women in the male-dominated organizations have mothers who are mostly employed themselves (Lemkau, 1983 & Ginzberg, 1966). In this study this relationship was not prominent and most of the mothers though possessing sound educational background reported to be homemakers. Father being a government employee had to frequently shift to various locations all over the country and it was observed as well as reported by few of the participants that because of their father being not around all the time, their mothers had to take up more responsibilities and also function independently. One participant emphasised the role of her mother as:

“I must say that I am able to achieve all this because of my mother as she brought up us well and my father wasn’t much around because of his job so my mother played the major role.”

(Personal communication, July 17, 2010)

In the absence of father, the mothers took up both the roles. The daughters grew up witnessing their mothers as taking care of home as well as managing outside home requirements also. Here, mother played a pivotal role by being role models themselves and in turn contributing in their daughter’s independence and learning not to label any work based on gender. So maternal employment, which was not high in this study still contributed in pushing these girls towards choosing this profession as. One of the participants reported that since her father was away so her mother accompanied her from Kerala to Varanasi for the selection in the Air Force. Maternal employment did not emerge to be a reason that contributed in making the career choice but maternal independence and her ability of multi-tasking as suggested by the present study, definitely contributed in making the participants more independent and confident which eventually helped them in making a non-traditional career choice.
Therefore maternal employment did not emerge to be a contributing factor but maternal independence and the ability to fulfill various demands in father’s absence surfaced as an important factor.

1.2.4 Sports and NCC as Catalyst

It was evident from the data that most of the participants had keen interest in sports and were also involved in NCC. The ones, who were not into sports, were in some way involved in outdoor activities. They all enjoyed the outdoor physical sports activities and one reported to have played basketball at national level. NCC can be the platform that gave them the first taste of military life and facilitated their decision to take up military flying as a career. Sports are by and large considered to be very close to being associated to masculinity. Postow (1980) argued that sports related attitude such as devotion to a team, stamina and competitive spirit are perceived as masculine. The involvement is sports improves the physical fitness, and once they feel that strength, they somewhere do not feel physically weak to the boys and this perhaps supports the belief of being equal to men. This ideology helps them to choose a masculine job. NCC training gives them a fair idea of tough military life and it also prepares them to face the training and eventually the challenges of the military flying. Therefore we can say that sports and NCC works as a catalyst and is a guiding force for these women to go for non-traditional profession.

2. Transition of Gender-Role Identity

“She’s decisive, she’s aggressive, she’s proven, and she’s capable with high-performance jets. We look for people with the capability to think on their feet and to be able to lead a team of people. We look for the best pilots out there, and if they happen to be a women, great, but we’re just looking for the best.”
The experience of military culture is unique for the women joining it. The masculine nature of military demands its personnel to have attributes of a soldier and the same is expected out from the women officers also. There are various factors that contribute to the changes in the physical aspect as well as personality trait for women in the military. The experience of training is significantly crucial to the entire process of transition. The physical training contributes towards making these women aware of the physical capability and the fact about what they are physically capable of achieving which in turn gives them the confidence to consider themselves at par with their male counter parts. The changes in their grooming, appearance and ideologies provide the evidence of the transition from traditional femininity to non traditional femininity. As the identification with the new (military) role increases, the connection with the feminine role weakens.
Fig 4.2: The Thematic Network for Global Theme of Transition of Gender Role Identity

- CHANGING BODY IMAGE
- AWARENESS OF PHYSICAL STRENGTH
- CHALLENGING THE SOCIETAL STANDARD OF PHYSICAL STRENGTH
- PHYSICAL ASPECT OF TRAINING
- EXPERIENCE OF TRAINING
- SETTLING THE TENSION (ADAPTATION)
- EMERGING NEW ROLE
- IDENTIFICATION WITH THE MILITARY ROLE
- TRANSITION OF GENDER-ROLE IDENTITY
- DRIFTING FROM FEMININE ROLE
- TRADITIONAL FEMININE ROLE / ASPECT
- PROVING WORTH
- PHYSICAL CHANGES AND APPEARANCE
- MORALITY AS PATRIOTISM
- MOBILITY
- IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT
2.1 Experience of Training

Military training has different dimensions emphasizing tremendously on certain masculine attributes like physical training, drills, military skills and ability to lead. The discrepancies between the stereotypic attributes of women and the demands of Indian Air Force training is an interesting aspect that can be analysed through the training experience of the participants and how the transition of gender-role identity is initiated by the exposure to the masculine training of the Indian Air Force.

2.1.1 Physical Aspect of Training

One of the main components of training is the physical training. Which is designed keeping in mind the physical endeavour military personnel has to face regularly. The aim is to increase the fitness level of them and make them physically tough to face the physical challenge. Most of the participants found it extremely challenging and stressful. The description given by one of the participants captures the training details as:

“The first day I went to the academy, the kind of training that you are exposed to; it really freaks you out.”

(Personal communication, July 15, 2010)

Clearly, physical training is a crucial aspect of military training. It not only improves their physical fitness but also gives them the confidence and awareness of their physical strength. There is a difference in the way physical training was perceived and assessed by the participants. For those who were in sports prior to their joining, the physical training was not found to be very difficult but ones who were not into sports reported difficulty in coping up with the physical training.
2.1.2 Changing Body Image

Impact of the physical training is seen as the changing body image. Most of the participants observed various changes in their body due to physical training. They described how their soft feminine body transformed into a hard, tough and a fitter one. The way they stood to the way they walked, the impact of physical training was evident. Details of the physical change given by one of the participants were as:

“Oh yes, of course, after the first six months when I was to come back home, my family almost didn’t recognize me. My mom once said at that stage that I sent a daughter to the Air Force and now a son has come back. A lot of changes happen physically. you know initially it does change you a lot because you lose a lot of weight, your body hardens up because you are used to doing things the hard way.”

(Personal communication, July 26, 2010)

Physical training helped them attain good fitness level. There was a noticeable change in the way they walked and stood. They stood straight, mostly in attention and walked up right. The physical attributes that one associate with women under go certain changes due to the physical training. They explain further that since they have to stand with men so they should be like men and moreover there is a way to conduct oneself in the uniform and that is close to masculine way. Soldiering comes naturally to men and women have to put in conscious effort to be one. Therefore to be able to do justice to their new role and conform to the military environment, they leave their feminine projection of behaviour and bring changes that are acceptable in the men’s world. Training period is the time when most of the women cadets get their hair cut into something short and manageable which brings
out the fact that how during military training women move away from femininity or the identity related to feminine aspect weakens. The shift from being feminine to not-so feminine is one of the most intriguing impacts of the military physical training. Having served for more than ten years in the IAF, one of them shared her experience of the physical changes as:

“There is a hell of a lot of difference, now you are more boyish type. Though I was an extrovert and into sports, I was more girlish.”

(Personal communication, July 25, 2010)

The acceptance of this changed body image signifies the shift in the attitude towards physical attributes. The aim is to look fit and smart in uniform and not feminine or masculine.

2.1.3 Challenging Societal Standards of Physical Strength

The women in uniform exemplify courage, mental and physical strength. Society normally does not recognise these qualities with women. Women are considered physically weak and dependent. Participants described their physical training experiences mostly in terms of the challenges that they had to face and they all pushed their limits to reach the physical standard required to be a military personnel. They stressed the fact that military is all about stretching oneself and even if they were challenging the societal standards of physical strength, they have to take up the challenges to survive in military. Military approves of women who challenge the societal standard of physical strength. A participant shared her views as:

“Military is all about stretching yourself and for women

Maybe it’s a bit more but it is for the women who can stretch themselves, it’s not for the women who want a normal typical role…so it is all part of the military life and I took up the
challenge gladly. Military life makes you strong but I feel it takes
a strong woman to opt for this profession."

(Personal communication, July 27, 2010)

So, they stand in contrast to the standards set by the society as they are able to
endure the physical exertion of the training. The societal standards for women are not
accepted in the military. Military accepts women who are physically and mentally
strong.

2.1.4 Awareness of Physical Strength

In military women try, test and later also become aware of their strength. The
realization of their physical strength is a crucial aspect of self concept. Most of the
participants became aware of the limits of their physical capabilities. They learnt
what their body was capable of attaining. This self awareness was especially
prominent in physical training sessions. Many women believed exceeding the female
requirements to be essential to achieving the respect of the male counter parts.
Proving one’s physical capability is a vital agenda for the women during training.
They do realize they are physically stronger than the regular women and are proud of
the fact that they fall under this bracket where few of them only make it. This it self
makes them understand and stand differently from the other women. The awareness
of physical strength adds to the self confidence required to perform the military role
as physical capability and endurance as crucial to becoming of a military personnel.
When women witness achieving higher standard of physical strength they gradually
find themselves comparable to men and begin to believe that women can take on and
justify the military role. The participants revealed that they also became aware of the
physical limitation as compared to men but the fact that they are better than so many
other women and are chosen above many people who attempted to join forces reinforced the belief that they are capable and deserving.

2.2 Drifting from the Feminine Role

The transition of the gender-role identity is evident on analysing the degree to which the participants have drifted from the traditional gender-role identity. The physical and the attitudinal changes are attributed to be the effect of the involvement in the masculine profession.

2.2.1 Traditional Feminine Role/Aspect

Traditionally Indian Armed Forces have been a sole realm of men but the induction of women officers has opened an opportunity for them to perform in a non-traditional profession. While choosing military as a career, women have taken up a role that we normally associate with men. Most of the participants agreed that military had changed them as person. The qualities they associated earlier (before joining Air Force) were as gullible, shy, naive, vulnerable, friendly, sensitive, caring, graceful, pretty, innocent, confident, emotional, adventurous, extrovert and dependent. We clearly describe the above mentioned qualities as that of women or feminine. The participants described and saw themselves differently later (after the training and service in the Air Force) as more assertive, multiskilling, more confident, having good judgement, dealing better with people, strong willed, independent, handling things better, speaking their mind, responsible, optimistic, having a broader perspective and mature. Comparing the two descriptions, we are able to appreciate the kind of change that these women have gone through due to military training and service. There is a difference in the two descriptions given by the participants. One of them who described herself as gullible and shy before joining Air Force gave a contrasting description of herself after training as being assertive and independent.
This definitely signifies the transition from feminine role to not-so-feminine role. The drifting from the femininity is explicitly visible in the description given by the participants. Most of the participants have given typical feminine description of themselves while explaining the qualities before joining Air Force but soon after the training the description of them is more masculine. One of the participants described herself before joining Air force as:

“I was sensitive, I was caring, I was graceful and I was pretty.”

The same participant described herself after training and having served for few years in the Air Force as:

“Confident, strong willed and independent”

(Personal communication, July 25, 2010)

Clearly, one can appreciate the change that military has brought about in her. Her description of herself is in contrast and explains the transition which happens gradually but substantially. It’s interesting to see how femininity accepts masculinity once exposed to military life. Further one of them shared her experience as a woman in the Air Force as:

“It’s not very feminine; I mean nothing is feminine in the armed forces and it does change you as a women, you know as a women you end up doing things beyond your boundaries because you would normally not do these things in the civil world. A very small example but an effective one is you know whenever from growing up till date whenever you have your periods you take extra care and precautions, doing things the right way. Don’t exert or stress yourself, you take rest if required, drink plenty of water and that is how you are taught to grow up but in the armed forces you don’t have any such days in
which you can take special care. Your life is the same each day and
there are no such concession. This change is now a part of your life.”

(Personal communication, June 26, 2010)

It is evident that the military role takes precedence over other roles. Once they
are in uniform they are an officer. Therefore the identity of these women is not
limited to their gender. It was gathered that the gender is not the only salient aspect of
their identity; they make meaning of themselves in variety of other ways like focusing
on the demands of the military life and not allowing gender to be a barrier. Few of
these women are happy to be juggling both the feminine and the masculine aspect and
appeared to be enjoying the privileges of both the worlds. Even if they have drifted
from the typical feminine role they still feel like a woman. The experience of one of
the participants is:

“Inside it’s me but I project to be like or equal to the men...you cant
forget who you are but at the same time you have to pretend that you
are not a typical girl but just as good as any one sitting in that cockpit.
I don’t know how to put this but I am sure you can’t put your feminine
side in front...it works this way.

(Personal communication, July 20, 2010)

Somewhere even after moving away from the traditional feminine role, the
participant know that inside they are all woman and although they have taken up a
different role but still they are called a woman only, that can not be changed. They
think they have just added more to their identity while admitting that they are not
typically feminine. The qualities which they have inculcated and learnt during there
tenure in the Air Force has helped them take up the masculine role of the military. So,
one can conclude that women in the Air Force extend their present boundary of
femininity to achieve the military role and this way their identification with the feminine role weakens at times.

2.2.2 Proving Worth

Most of the participants strive to prove their worth in the military. It was evident from their responses that they are in military because they are proving a point to themselves as well as to the others including their male counter parts. Most of the respondents were the first girl to be selected for Air Force flying from their respective region so that made them and their families extremely proud of them. The sense of achievement was tremendously high and by being a pioneer they all proved their worth. These girls had the zeal to do something different from the very beginning and one of the main ingredients that surfaced from their responses is that they all wanted to prove their capability as a military flier. The participants also occasionally revealed that the men in the military underestimate women in uniform and that is another reason to prove them. They disclosed that they have to put in double the amount of work to be considered equal to men and they take up the challenge of doing that extra bit because they want to show their calibre and that is the only way to be accepted in the military. Most of them agreed that as compared to men, it is not easy to carry the role of an Air Force pilot for women. Wearing military uniform, flying the machine and matching every step with men; makes an ultimate achievement for any woman. The fact that you are one of those very few women, who have been chosen after passing a series of difficult tests, makes you a rare and a proud woman.

2.2.3 Physical Change and Appearance

During the interviews a special attention was given to how the participants dress up as I was interested in knowing as to how they project themselves as women. Most of the participants choose to dress up in their uniform for the interview even
when it was not necessary. I sensed that they all identified strongly with the uniform and preferred to look like an officer. Most of the participants agreed that their attitude towards their appearance has changed and now they have something besides dressing up and grooming which is central to their identity. Air Force expects women officer’s to follow the rules regarding the dress code which includes details about hair style as well as makeup. It was interesting to know that most of the participants took interest in dressing up before joining Air Force but after joining their keenness in dressing up has gone down. The value attached to dressing up is not the same and they identify more with their role not with what they wear. One of the participants compared her appearance and described it as:

“I think I was definitely better looking but yes earlier I could take care of myself and spend time on my own personality. I could groom myself better and concentrate on how I would like to carry myself”

(Personal communication, July 15, 2010)

Women reported that they are more comfortable being this way. In uniform there are restrictions that you can not were makeup, paint your nails or sport a different hairstyle other than a bun. Nevertheless, one of them said that people find her more attractive now as they are amazed to find a decent looking girl who is also a pilot. It is not just a pretty face but more to it, so this combination excites people more. These women get so used to of looking like in a certain way (not-so-feminine) that they stop trying something else. The confidence these women boost of does not come from the way they look but from who they are. Joining military changes the identity of these women. Their primary identity is related to their military profession
and how good they look has nothing to do with their primary and most crucial identity. One of the participants shared her experience and explained that:

“I am for some reason more comfortable in military form of dressing than the civil form. It is much understated; it’s very simple and more prim and proper. I am not comfortable with the flashy, jazzy way of dressing up. But in college it was not the same. I took interest in dressing up and liked to pay attention.”

(Personal communication, July 25, 2010)

One thing that clearly emerges out is that military training does change one’s attitude towards grooming and dressing. Military wants its women to be an officer and does not recognize feminine aspect of a woman. There is little or no value given to how you look so when women take up military as profession they start to relate less to feminine aspects as it has less importance in military scenario. In fact one of the participants said that looking good can go against you in military and people can find it more difficult to see you as a military personnel. If you have a plain and casual approach than you are accepted better. Military and beauty does not go too well. The description that one participant gave was:

“During my academy days I realized that grooming was seen in a negative way so that you do not look even remotely good.”

(Personal communication, July 25, 2010)

Military people will take you seriously if you groom yourself like a man but if you explore your feminine side and try to look good than it is not appreciated. Military wants its women to look beyond beauty and display confidence in terms of who you are and not how you look.
One more observation was that there were few participants who from the time they were in the school, were not into fashion and dressing up. It can be concluded that for those girls who never gave much importance to looking good or who were never under pressure to conform to feminine stuff, choose this profession as in military it did not matter how you look but you were judged purely on your performance basis. So, we found either the participants changed their attitude towards dressing or they were the one’s who never bothered about dressing in the first place. One participant, who has quit Air Force after having served for ten years, elaborated her experience of grooming in the Air Force as:

“I used to like dressing up and being feminine but after coming to force I feel there is a stigma attached to women officers is that they have to look like officers and not like a lady. Initially I wanted to do all the girly stuff but later I got used to this way of dressing up. But I feel it now, I mean after leaving Air Force I feel what I was missing. When I was in forces I did not miss dressing up but after quitting I realized there is much more to a girl.”

(Personal communication, July 22, 2010)

The above lines vividly describe that looking good is very close to most of the women and they value their looks a lot. Even if military makes one forget about grooming and the dressing but given a chance most of the women would pay attention to their looks more than what they did while serving in the forces. Like one said there is more to a girl. For few others that becomes the part of life and they can never detach themselves from the military form of dressing up. They identify themselves with a more understated and formal form of dressing up. The change that has been
brought about is attributed to the military training and culture. In order to take on the military role the participants move away from the feminine things that they associated with earlier and admit now they are not all that “lady like”. They appeared to be compensating how they looked by what they have achieved. They may not be very happy with how they look in the military form of dressing but everything takes a back seat when one compares it to what they have achieved. This is how one of the participants described it as:

“The military dressing is so strict that it leaves you with no choice but not to look very attractive. After sometime you probably get used to looking not very attractive or being beautiful but at the same time you get something else. How many girls are there who get this opportunity? So, it’s okay and worth the effort.”

(Personal communication, July 20, 2010)

As explained, women weigh the consequences and they know what they are getting is priceless and every adjustment you make is weighed in comparison to what you are getting end of it and as admitted by most of the respondents, it becomes part of you, you learn to associate less with the typical culturally recognized femininity.

2.2.4 Ideological Shift

Some of the ideologies of the participants appeared to have gone through certain changes due to their exposure to the military life style. There were occasions when participants did not realized any change in there ideologies or thinking but it was apparent after analysis. The way the participants saw themselves definitely changed after training. Most admitted having faith in their own capabilities and are more open minded now. Their ideology about how a woman should be has changed. Earlier they had the homely image of their mothers as the example of women but now
they think there is more to women than just her femininity. They believe that femininity includes more than what it is assumed to. They also advocate that women have to put in double the effort to be considered equal to men. Most of them carried this ideology that women are constantly under pressure to prove themselves and men tend to be critical of the women in uniform as they perceive them not suitable for such profession. One of them recalled how she tried to explain her plight to the male counter parts:

“I remember I sat with my course mate and told him, look I am doing ten times more job than you, I am doing it more sincerely than you because I think generally girls are more sincere. Among twenty boys one does a mistake no body catches him but among two girls one does a mistake and every one talks about it. We cannot afford to do that.”

(Personal communication, July 17, 2010)

The above lines support the argument that participants did exhibit more self believe and took a stand when people questioned them. The ideology that women have to work much harder and be more cautious was shared by most of the participants. They thought that by getting selected in the Air Force they have proved themselves but they later realized that they have to constantly prove themselves. The women admitted to the fact that they now respect their views more and believe that they are entitled to have one and also voice it. The ideological shift signifies the transition in the thinking due to the exposure to the military life style. Faith and belief in ones capabilities strengthen due to military training as reported by most of the participants.
2.2.5 Mobility

A pilot in the Indian Air force has to travel frequently, to varied places and at odd timings. Travelling is the integral part of the Air Force pilot. Mobility was seen by most of the participant as adding to their sense of independence and enabling them to take care of themselves even in difficult situations. They felt now they were not answerable to people and could be on their own which contributed to their freedom. Going to different places, living in all kinds of accommodation and sometimes you are the only woman in the entire crew gives an extra edge to these women and makes them more responsible and independent. Participants reported that when you are in uniform then people also understand the demands of your job and do not object to a woman travelling to odd places at odd times. You are respected for your work and contribution to the service of the nation. It is interesting to witness that the same girl who was expected to be house before dark can now be out till late night and can freely travel to unheard places all alone. The equation changes drastically and all that people see in you is a military personnel who is capable to take care of herself. A participant shared her views as:

“Mobility makes you more independent. You feel you can just step out and continue. Initially I remember being in Delhi staying out late even later than seven was a no-no with my parents but being in this profession you somehow feel you have got to walk out on your own and think you can take care of yourself.”

(Personal communication, July 15, 2010)

They agreed that it is service requirement to be mobile and it helps you to live on your own. Therefore mobility contributes a lot in making these women what they are today. In other words we can say that travelling gives these women that
confidence which is required to be a military pilot. The experience of travelling comes very handy and nothing is a surprise as you are always prepared for variety. Travelling is also considered as something adventurous and since these women welcome adventure so they are comfortable travelling.

2.2.6 Morality in Terms of Patriotism

Women in the military are exposed to a lot of independence (personal as well as financial) and there are different kinds of men around them, because of this there was some degree of curiosity to find out how the morals get affected when women are exposed and encouraged to be like men in the military set up and they are also financially very sound and independent. We do expect women to be high on moral values but what happens when women are in situations where they have men all around and they are encouraged to be like them with no visible restrictions. It was interesting to find out that for the women in the Air Force morality was in terms of patriotism for the country. Their loyalty to the nation was the test of their morality. What mattered most was how true you are to your country and patriotism was the ultimate and the most important virtue in an armed personnel. Air Force personnel are taught to fight for and protect his/her nation and that is their ultimate duty. Thus morality is weighed in terms of patriotism and not the way society looks at it. A soldier’s moral duty is to protect the nation and therefore we conclude that the country comes first for military personnel. In a study by Ficarrotta (1997) to find how military professionals are bound by higher moral standard. He explained that it is commonly believed that, in some sense, military professionals are bound by a higher moral standard. This belief is especially prevalent inside the military. There are unique moral obligations for military professionals that most other people simply do not
have. Since military personnel is seen as a protector and leading the nation so we normally rate them high on morals.

One of the participants who stressed the fact that being in the male dominated profession can never be a reason for the women to go little easy on their morals and she advocated her views as:

“I think people get confused between high bound and morals. Moral values should be judged not by the actions but by the intentions. Like just because I dress in a sari or cover my head does not make me a wonderful women or probably just because I wear an off shoulder dress or a low jean does not make me a bad woman either. Same way I would say coming home by five in the evening or working till late night. Finally what you do is dictated by what you have learnt from your position in life. Yes, in this profession I do get exposed to a lot of variety but there after it depends upon how I have been brought up and what I learnt from that exposure. “

(Personal communication, July 15, 2010)

Participants agreed that they do enjoy more freedom than other women but morality is not dependent on freedom alone and for military personnel patriotism is the ultimate recognized value.

2.3 Emerging New Role

‘This is not a time when women should be patient. We are in a war and we need to fight it with all our ability and every weapon possible. Women pilots, in this particular case, are a weapon waiting to be used.’

(Eleanor Roosevelt, 1942)
2.3.1 Settling the Tension (Adaptation)

Military is primarily a patriarchal institution that depends on masculine ideology in order to carry out its goals. Women pilots in military must prove that they have culturally defined masculine qualities such as self-control and stoicism, while also negotiating cultural definition of femininity that have provided them with stable gender identities throughout their lives and which makes them a woman. The participants agreed that choosing military flying as a profession is easier than actually going through the tough military life because this is not what women instantly relate to and they have to primarily decide how they are going to identify themselves with the masculine role. The participants reported military life to be initially tough on women and they view themselves as actively constructing meaningful identities. While most of the women struggled with the new role initially but eventually they get used to it and mould themselves to suit the military requirement, it becomes easier. The women felt empowered to the extent that they could defy traditional feminine expectations, none of them questioned the social construction of masculinity or femininity, instead interpreting these concepts as natural, biological and fixed. This helps them adapt a new challenging role without loosing their identity. The respondents choose not to project their femininity while in uniform as it is not appreciated and you are not seen as capable military personnel. They also opt out of the conflict between femininity and soldering and instead concentrate on adding meaning to their role in the military. They do not attempt to be called a man or see a typical woman in them. They want to be a meaningful combination of both the extremes.
2.3.2  Acceptance of Military Role

Acceptance of the military role can be explained in terms of the way they identify with the role of a military pilot. Most of the women pilots confirmed that they were not fully aware of what is expected out of them in the military at the time of joining. Some of them were under the impression that they would be only trained in flying and will have to not go through the typical tough military training. According to Beattie & M. Peter (2002), most contributors note that women in many cultures have achieved new opportunities and rights by performing military service; they generally conclude that these openings fall far short of approximating equality with men. Further more, to succeed in military institutions, many women find they are pressured to renounce their femininity. Participants welcomed the change in them to accept the new role. Military role demands renouncing femininity and it was evident while studying the changes encountered due to exposure to military culture. Clearly, as women identify more with the masculine culture of military, their acceptance of the new role becomes easier. While sharing thoughts about the acceptance of the new role most of the participants mentioned the attitude of men towards women in military. They are aware that men are not completely open to the idea of women in the forces and this attitude does pose obstructions in their proper functioning as military personnel. In a study by Ivarson, Estrada & Berggren (2005) to understand men’s attitude towards women in the Swedish Armed forces, found that as women seek opportunities within the military profession, they may find themselves in an environment that does not fully recognize or reward their contribution. As a result women may be more likely to withdraw from the military role. Further this study suggests that male officer’s attitude towards women in the military were not particularly liberal or egalitarian. This raises some interesting issues regarding the
universality of the military experience across cultures. It may be that regardless of the particular country or culture, military organizations may share universal values and traditions that tend to favour men over women. In Indian Armed Forces also this may present a challenge to the integration of the women officers. So, while women are all geared up to take the military role, the men are apprehensive about the degree of contribution women officers can make. One of the participant disclosed that on certain occasions she did hear her male colleagues telling her that “look you are a girl so you don’t get this job”. But when these women accept this role they are assertive enough to demand equality and question when they are discriminated.

In another study by Francine & Weinstein (2000), women’s relationships with military institutions are peripheral and usually hidden (camouflage). They are hidden because women must “don gender camouflage to survive in a hostile institution.” Further more, the military hides “its reliance on woman power in order to maintain its self image as a quintessential masculine institution”. Similarly in the present study participants confirmed that they have to be in some aspect like men and not display their femininity to be accepted as a military pilot and they had to imbibe masculine qualities. There are many factors associated to the acceptance of military role by the women. It is not only dependent on the women’s effort but also how military accepts women in the masculine culture.

1. **Negotiation of Gender-Role Identity**

   ‘I’m an Air Force officer first, a pilot second and then a Nicole. The female part is last….but my job is to be the best wingman that I can be.’

   (Malachowski, 15 March 2006)
It is evident that while performing masculine job like military, women drift from the tradition femininity in order to take on the new role. The transition further demands certain strategies to be employed so that women are able to perform non-traditional masculine job while keeping their identity of a women as central. The process of negotiation of identity in the military scenario is complex but there are various factors that help them negotiate their gender-role identity. The complex process becomes simpler when there is a strong support system in terms of family as they validate the actions of these women and give them the confidence in themselves. Women also bargain their various different roles by not trying to be a ‘perfect’ traditional women rather allowing all the other roles to help facilitate the military role as it is crucial to there identity.

**Table 4.2: Table Showing Global Theme, Organizing Themes and Sub-themes of negotiation of Gender-Role Identity of the Women Pilots of the Indian Air Force.**

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1.1 Dynamics of Negotiation

Negotiating gender-role identity in the military set-up is a complex and an interesting element as it has many inter-woven factors to it. Negotiation of gender-role identity begins from the day the training starts and it continues till the entire service period. Although the conflict and the complexity of the negotiation decreases as the experience of the military life expands.
Fig 4.3: The Thematic Network for the Global Theme of Negotiation of Gender Role Identity
1.1.1 Complexity

Having witnessed the transition in the women military pilots, it is imperative to find the strategies they employ to deal with it. Women in the Air Force have to negotiate the various roles in order to draw meaning out of their new encounter with the military culture. Occasionally, participants contradicted themselves while negotiating femininity in the military sphere. These contradictions are central to the process of negotiation as it emphasises the profound complexity of their situation. The complexity emerged when they were asked to elaborate whether they are themselves in uniform or do they try to be like their male counter parts. The contradictions in their statements brought their situation on surface and the concluded complexity can be assessed by the following statement by one of the participants:

“In uniform I see myself. I feel happier being me rather than them. In fact as a joke sometime the men comment, “hey, you are a girl also” and I say well, this profession does not let me know stand like a girl, it tells me to be your counterpart I am Supposed to stand with you so I will do exactly what you do but in my style.”

(Personal communication, June 26, 2010)

The participant here starts by stressing that she is comfortable and is herself in the uniform but as she describes further, she revels that this profession does not allow her to be a woman and she wants to do things exactly the same way as men do it. The above said lines conclude nothing but the complex and the confused state of the women in the military flying. Indeed the entire process to craft outcomes to satisfy various interests is complicated for women in the military. Negotiation can be understood as these women bargain their femininity in the masculine culture of
military. What is the correct degree of femininity one has to display while serving in the Indian Air Force? Can one retain her femininity and still take on the masculine role of military personnel? These women are constantly weighing themselves against the military requirement that they are suppose to meet.

1.1.2 Compromise

While describing negotiation, the participants emphasised importance of making compromises as crucial. A closer look at the compromises these women have to make, one does realize that they work towards benefiting them. They label it as a compromise but actually they are at the advantage of the entire effort. All the adjustments that they make benefit them in turn. We learn that it is women who dictate terms and conditions and people around them have to adjust accordingly. They call it as compromising on their part but it is actually planning to suit ones requirement. Most of the participants agree that they are not burdened by their husbands to cook and take care of the household like the typical ladies. She is not under pressure to also look after the home front and most of the time they share the work load and she is not answerable to anybody for not doing gender role (household chores). This for any working women is a huge benefit because in a typical set up, a woman even if she is professional is expected to justify her role of a woman in the house. A typical working women in our society is expected to also do household chores and is answerable for not being able to justify her role of a woman but in case of the women in military we are in for a bit of surprise when we see that there are not such similar expectations from them and they are not really answerable for not “doing gender”. In a way, they have an easy convenient exit from the demands. One of the participants explained this as:

“I think since my husband is also a pilot, so he understands the stress
of my profession, that is a big bonus for me. When I go back from flying
he knows that I can’t tell her to make roties right now because he knows
how tired and exhausted I am so I’d say that for this switching of roles
my husband plays a very important role. I may have to make certain
compromises that dinner will not always be at 8, lunch will not always be
at 2. Good thing is that meals and all is taken care by the mess. So if my
husband wants he can have his meals in the mess.”

(Personal communication, June 26 2010)

The negotiation becomes considerably simpler when they are not pressured to play a typical woman in the house. The home set up is different and mess facility is readily available and is utilized whenever required. With reduced household responsibilities, the participants reported to be able to do full justice to their military role. While bargaining it was observed that their military role takes precedence over any other role and everything is arranged in order to facilitate them perform their duty at the best and rest takes a back seat. Though, the equation changes to some extent when they enter motherhood. The actual negotiation begins when they have to juggle between being an officer, a professional, a wife, a mother and also a woman. Most of them agreed that being a mother and also a military professional is the toughest a woman can handle. It is just a way too much on your hands to tackle. It does get beyond ones capacity to handle because now actually they have to make compromises in the real sense and being a mother can be a lot more demanding.

1.1.3 Supportive System

An important and integral component of negotiation is the support system in the form of the family and also the organization. All the participants acknowledge the role that their family plays in helping them negotiate. Indeed without their support and
encouragement the negotiation and switching of various roles appears to be an uphill task for them. Demands and the pressure of playing various roles are balanced with the support and concern of the family. By extending their support, family also confirms the view that women in the military are doing a tremendous job and should continue to contribute with same vigour and dedication. This way family displays their trust in the women who are engaged in the non-traditional professions and which helps them take up the new role with confidence and conviction. While stressing on the importance of the family, one of the participant shared her emotions as:

“Playing so many roles is difficult but I feel if a girl is doing so well and exhaling so much than the other people around you will adjust. In my case my mother-in-law has been with me through out since my child’s birth and she is so happy that her daughter-in-law is a pilot and an officer in the air force. So I feel more than us it’s the people around us who adjust. It is impossible to be able to do this without their support.”

(Personal communication, July 5, 2010)

All the participants reported to have extremely supportive husbands and the fact that they are all married to air force pilots who understand the demands and the stress of their profession, provides them with necessary support. The spousal support emerges to be an important factor facilitating the negotiation process. Women participants declared that they are not expected to be a typical woman by their husbands and though military does not give them any concessions as a woman but their spouses allow them a lot of concessions and this certainly helps. This is in absolute contrast to experience of the other working women, who while working also, contribute completely to the other roles that they play. According to Malhotra &
Sachdeva (2005), women in profession with low level of perceived social recognition would experience more role conflict than those in profession with high level of perceived recognition. A women pilot and that too in the military is perceived with high level of recognition thus going by the above study we can conclude that they face less role conflict but here it is important to point that though high level of perceived recognition might prove to be beneficial to them but the contrast of the roles that they have to switch is definitely more stressful and conflicting. The family support thus plays a crucial role in helping one take on different role and also time to time confirms one’s belief in what they are doing. The participants confirmed that their family adjusts more than them while they put their military role in top priority. This is a huge bonus for the women who are defying the traditional role of women to some extent. Epstein, concluded that her women (sample) reported a strong family support for taking up a non-traditional career and this support also helps her take on that challenging role by not feeling out of place (as cited by Lemkau, 1983). All the women who are continuing and opting for an extension to serve are doing it also because they have a strong support system in the form of the family. Somewhere they also make a very wise choice when it comes to choosing a life partner and they advocate that a man in the military flying is best suited as he would be aware of their lifestyle and can not only understand the demands but also the limitations of a women pilot in the air force. No doubt without the required support of the families the negotiation is impossible as these women will not be able to carry the military role for long especially at the time when they become mothers. Negotiation is a joint effort including various family people who provide the require support and help them perform their duty without taking the tensions of other aspects.
1.2 Reconstruction of Gender-Role

‘The air is the only place free from prejudices’

(Coleman, 1921)

Induction of women in the military if generally understood as changing gender-role identity and the gender relations. As these women transform from traditional recognition to non-traditional recognition, there is reconstruction of gender-role taking place. Equal responsibility of a challenging military job and power to lead men working under you contribute towards reconstruction of gender-role identity of these women.

1.2.1 Responsibilities

With uniform and recognition come added responsibilities. Women in the military are not known by who they are but what they do. Participants reported that they feel more responsible now and since people look up to them they also have the responsibility of living up to that image. Even the people around them expected them to be more responsible. The participants confirmed that they also have to be careful as earning a bad name can jeopardize the future prospects of the women in the armed forces. Indeed when you fly a plane in the military than the list of responsibilities is never ending as one has to perform the duty of a pilot as well as of an air force office. It is learnt that sense of responsibility is very strong in these women. The sincerity with which they are committed to their profession helps them negotiate better because they admit that they can not afford to be irresponsible as there is a lot at stake. Their responsibilities are immense but they also help them take on the role of the military personnel more seriously. There responsibility as a military officer come first and takes precedence over other responsibilities. Whenever they are confronted with conflicting situations they remind themselves of their responsibility as an officer and
thus negotiate the conflict. It can be concluding as, though women in the military have more responsibilities but these responsibilities at the same time help them negotiate their identity better. When they are confronted with challenging situations (personal and professional) they think first like an air force officer and than like anybody else. They are clear, no matter what but their loyalties rest primarily with the nation. So whenever they negotiate, they keep in mind its effects on their military role and thus other roles do get affected but the military role is least affected.

1.2.2 Authority Figure

Most of the women talked enthusiastically about their role of an officer. It is explicit that the role of an air force officer is taken as their first identity. The identity of being an air force pilot is so powerful that they instantly relate to it. Since the feminine identity is slightly weak thus the identity related to being an officer is very strong and obvious. They place their military role in the top priority and declared that they see themselves first as an officer and than a woman. Further, they explained that in military we are not here to serve ourselves but the nation. By keeping their role of an officer in the front they avoid the confusion of prioritizing their various roles. The following lines said by one of the participants capture this sentiment as:

“We are not here serving for ourselves, we are serving for our nation and that role is of an officer. I see myself as an officer first and than as a woman.”

(Personal communication, July 23, 2010)

Their military role has a major influence on the other roles and they agreed to be thinking like an officer first and than like a woman. There is an advantage when you behave and think like an officer because than you keep gender aside. So this way they derive meaning by many other ways but gender.
1.3 Emotional Bargaining

‘I have no joys that are not yours,
No aches which are not yours.
I too call myself I.’

(Das, 1965)

With uniform come huge responsibilities and as their other roles start to emerge (wife and mother) there appears to be some degree of conflict with in an individual. As the new roles come into play, a bargaining in terms of defying some traditional ideas begins. Again the role of an Air Force Pilot remains at the centre and this role emerges after bargaining it from the other roles.

1.3.1 Defying “perfect” woman:

It is learnt that negotiation is a complex process and women in the military have to take into consideration many things. Most of the participants conceived military as a sphere where they could expand and even redefined the traditional form of femininity. They confirm that they can be different from the typical women and can afford to defy typical feminine roles. This is one negotiation strategy widely used by most of the women in the military that they do not burden themselves by trying to be a perfect copy book mother, wife or woman. The role conflict considerably decreases when they balance all the different roles by doing it to suit their convenience. They do not believe in stressing themselves with the typical feminine role rather they defy them whenever needed. Playing a typical woman is not easy for women in military and it is learnt that they do not even strive to be a “perfect” woman. They understand that to take up the military role they do have to give up being a typical woman and that helps them negotiate their various roles better. The participants agreed that people’s expectations to play a typical woman from them is
less and that is why they are accepted as they are. One of the participants while
describing the impact of her career on her life said the following:

“It has I think definitely influenced because people see me as some
body who is apart from just a wife, mother. Since my profession is
looked upon so for me my work take precedence whereas for a home
maker she would be expected to give priority to her home and children
and everyone will weigh her life in the same way. They will not naturally
expect her to have a life of her own or pursue her interest.”

(Personal communication, July 20, 2010)

Women in the military feel empowered to the extent that they can defy the
traditional feminine expectations and decide a new role for themselves. They feel
they have more control of their lives and thus can afford to make choices. According
to Malhotra & Sachdeva 2005, the stressfulness of task depends on the degree to
which it can be controlled. For Air Force pilots there is not much control that they
can exercise on the nature of their job but they have more control over other roles
especially the ones that are stereotypically feminine. The participants declared that
they are in control of their lives and are accepted and admired even if they do not
justify the typical feminine expectations. They agreed to be enjoying more privileges
than an ordinary Indian woman. Pleck’s (1977) notion of “asymmetrical permeable
boundaries”, which explains that demands of the family roles are permitted to intrude
into the work setting for women (as cited by Malhota & Sachdeva, 2005). This
intrusion by family into work has the potential to create conflict in women but since
the family role is less demanding for the women in the military as compared to the
other working women, we find them facing lesser degree of role conflict which helps
negotiate.
1.3.2 Facilitating Military Role

Women in the military play multiple roles which are not only very different but are also contrasting to each other. It was observed that these women design most of their other roles by keeping in mind their military role. Their other roles appear to be facilitating their military role. When women defy their typical feminine roles, it is evident that they mould their roles to suit the requirements. The military role is thus embraced by deflecting or tempering with the typical feminine roles. This means that although they are playing various roles but they are not under any pressure to play the feminine role with full justification. They can afford to be different and deviate from traditional femininity in order to take on the military challenge. We do occasionally are drawn towards the fact that by not doing gender, these women will face some kind of uneasiness because doing gender is essential to one’s self concept but we learn that they take immense pride in what they do. Their other roles are designed so that they help her perform the military role. The responsibility of an officer are immense and for women in military to do justice to their professional role as well as the familial role can be stressful, especially to manage the contrast of the roles. It was delightful to find that none of the participants wanted to choose one role over the other. They wanted to play all the roles and eventually all of them wanted to be a mother. But they believed in planning for it, so that their career is not affected adversely. The fact that all the participants believed that motherhood makes a women complete and they plan to welcome a baby in their lives, exposes the women behind the military uniform. This was an intriguing aspect to their personality: on one hand they are in military uniform talking and behaving like any other military officer and on the other hand we find a typical woman who dreams of becoming a mother. Indeed these women demand a lot more from life and seem to be enjoying the privileges of both
men a well as women’s world. As mentioned earlier, the participants appear to be
giving meaning to their identities in diverse forms. In a way they rise above the
gender biases or the debate and playing the role not based on the gender but
capabilities and the opportunities. Here, Negotiation implies the choices that these
women pilots make in order to facilitate their various roles. They feel empowered to
the extent that they defy the traditional understanding of femininity.
The focus of this study was to analyse and understand the impact of masculine military culture on the women pilots who are an integral part of the Indian Air Force. Firstly, the area of attention was to understand the impact in terms of the transition that it brings. The data indicated some facilitating factors from the early experiences which help to choose a non-traditional career choice. These crucial factors in the form of early experiences set the stage for the career choices they make later. The profound changes in the body image and also the attitudinal changes, transform them into someone who does not fit in our general understanding of traditional women but this does not cease to convey the new meaning and the definition of femininity that
that these women exemplify. While crafting a place for themselves in the male dominant Air Force culture, they renounce and stretch the boundary of cultural understanding of gender-role identity, while drawing meaning from the entire range of roles they play. They stretch the boundary of femininity till it precedes their recognition with the identity of a woman.
Summary and Conclusions

‘Flying is not about whether the pilot is a man or a woman.

*It is about the results of the actions imposed by the pilot

and the responses returned by the aircraft. The aircraft does
not know or understand gender it only knows the difference

in a true pilot, and one who was perhaps not meant to fly.*

(Kaye, 2000)

With women making inroads in the Indian Armed Forces, many questions have been raised about their suitability for the masculine male dominated military profession because it is not only about gender equality but primarily it concerns national security. Nevertheless, Indian Armed Forces, despite leaving several issues unanswered, inducted women in their various branches since early 90’s. Military role demands its personnel to have certain attributes which is seen as essential to them. Qualities like being assertive, aggressive, leadership, giving orders and the ability to take decisions is something that is closely associated to military uniform personnel and that’s what makes military highly masculine in nature. The qualities required to be a military personnel stands in contrast to the one that we associate with women, which are being caring, sensitive, emotional, passive, peace loving and nurturing. What happens when women take on the masculine challenges of military life? How the femininity is transformed or reproduced when women are exposed to the military life? Military life is sure to impact the lives of these women. How the transition of gender role identity takes place and how do they draw meaning out of their new non-traditional role while also remaining a woman are certain questions that instantly evoke curiosity.
The conundrum at the heart of this research is to analyse the nature of transition of gender identity of the women pilots of the Indian Air Force and also how they negotiate femininity in the masculine culture of military. Military is widely associated with men and the nature of job is highly masculine. Women joining military is generally seen as radically transforming gender stereotypes therefore it provides an interesting platform to study how femininity is transformed and redefined when it is exposed to the masculine culture of military. The aim of this research is to study and explain the nature of transition of gender role identity which is likely to occur when women take on the masculine military role. Further, this research also attempts to explore the techniques of negotiation that women pilots have to resort to in order to draw meaning out of their military role while retaining their gender identity.

Qualitative approach is utilized as in this research the quality of the experience of the women pilots is analysed. We are not interested in the number of responses but the quality of each response or experience. Through purposive and snowball sampling technique, total of 12 participants were included. The method used for collecting the data was face-to-face in depth interview and at few occasions telephonic interviews were taken as the participants were out of Bangalore city.

**Major Findings**

On analysing the data, certain pattern in the form of major findings emerged. Some of the findings are consistent with the findings of other researches. There are some findings which are in the hypothetical form and can be taken up for further research.

1. Pattern of findings suggests that there is a distinct set of women who opt for a challenging career like military flying. There are certain facilitating factors that encourage women to get drawn towards military life or opt for a non-traditional career
choice. Father in the military uniform, fascination and expectations are some crucial factors assisting a non-traditional career choice.

2. The research on background characteristics of women in military revealed several findings. As children, these women tended to have opportunities to explore and develop independently, to witness a wide range of experience. Open encouragement and support of achievement and androgynous exploration of “masculinity” as well as “feminine” endeavours within a stable family situation.

3. It has been found that women pilots tend to have more female siblings. They had mostly only female siblings or were the only girl child. We find that there is a strong connection between having only female sibling or being the only child and choosing military profession. Therefore having no sibling or only female sibling may be conducive to occupational attainment and success, at least in some male-dominated fields like military.

4. In addition, it has been found that parents of these women were well educated and fathers were mostly employed as government servant or military personnel. Though the maternal employment was not high but they were all described as very independent and capable mothers. They mostly described their mothers as taking care of both the household chores and the outside work. This study suggests that education of parents and independence of mother does contribute toward women opting to join male-dominated military flying.

5. Our understanding of military also includes exhibition of physical strength and endeavour which is very similar to the requirement of sports activity. It was found that, mostly the women participants excelled or were involved in some or the other sports activity during their school and college days. The initial participation in sports does contribute towards making these women choose military as a serious profession.
convincingly because they are than aware that they are physically capable of taking the military challenges. They were also found to be an active NCC (National Cadet Corps) cadet, which definitely provided them with the first taste of the military life and hence they realized their actual potential and interest.

6. It has been found as the participants reported that their soft feminine body changed into a hard masculine one. Physical changes are the first visible sign of transformation that women reported to have observed during training period. Therefore we conclude that military training does change women’s image of how her body should be because the women in the military welcome these changes as crucial to helping them adapt or accepted to the masculine role. It is found that shift from being feminine to not-so-feminine is one of the most intriguing impacts of the military physical training. It is also seen that the physical changes come first and the other changes in the personality soon follow. Thus, physical changes are essential to experience in order to take on the military role. Because of the various physical changes, these women start to deviate from the conventional femininity. Military accepts women who are physically and mentally strong which stands in contrast to the standards set by the society.

7. It has been found that military brings about certain changes in women and it surely loosens their connection to femininity. We find them drifting from the traditional feminine roles and imbibing certain masculine characteristics. By analysing the experience of the military women pilots we find visible transition from femininity to aspects which are more closely associated to masculinity. There were profound changes in their personality traits. From being caring, sensitive to emotional, they moved towards being more confident, assertive and independent.
8. This research also witnessed that the women soon after joining military displayed less keenness to dress up and groom themselves as women which indicates deviation from the feminine things as looking attractive and grooming is very close to being a woman. It has been found that women who consider looking good and attractive as less important tend to join military as here they are not under pressure to present themselves in beautiful feminine way. They could choose to be unattractive as in military how you look is not important but it is your capability of a military personnel that counts. Therefore for few women it is an escape from certain negative aspects of femininity.

9. Women in the military enjoy the privileges of both masculine and feminine worlds. The burden of doing gender is considerably less for them as compared to other regular women.

10. The society is generally considerate to them as the uniqueness and rarity of their profession sets them above and apart from most of the women and this commands great respect.

11. They redefine the culturally recognized definition of femininity and draw meaning from both the contrasting roles they play. The new definition of femininity allows a woman to be powerful, assertive, independent and the same time keeping her identity of a woman as central. Further, it is found that if needed women can stretch the boundary of their femininity and recognize with many culturally recognized qualities of masculinity.

**Limitations of the study**

The present study which was done using an in-depth interview technique has a limitation as the data collected is based on the retrospective method. Here the participants recollected their experience in an interview setting, which was completely
dependent upon how they recall and explained a particular experience. More in-depth analysis of the childhood and early life experience may have given an intense understanding of the contribution that stems from early experiences. As an introductory study this focuses more on the dimensions related to gender-role identity in the social context. The paradigm used for this study was embedded in the social constructivism framework and how reality is created through social interactions. The experiential experience could be explored further by analysing the lived experiences.

**Implications of the study**

As an introductory study this research deals with the women in non-traditional career like military flying and as to how they are impacted. Further, the framework of this study can be utilized to understand and analyse the experience of women in other male dominated careers. This study also brings to attention the emergence of gender equality in the society. This indicates the face of the changing society in terms of providing and encouraging gender equality. As the role of the women is changing in the society, they are also moving towards more independence. It is useful to comprehend through such studies as how the independence changes one’s self-concept. This study opens up avenues to conduct further researches that bring out our enhanced understanding of the women and our society.
References


Psychological Review.


Informed Consent Form

This research is conducted as part of the M.Phil Psychology program run by the Department of Psychology at Christ University. This study is conducted under the guidance of Dr. Baiju Gopal (Department of Psychology, Christ University). The informed consent form is to ensure that rights of human participants are protected at all times during this study. The following will provide you with information about the study which will help you in deciding whether or not you wish to participate. If you agree to participate, please be aware that you are free to withdraw at any point throughout the duration of the study.

Please find below the details of this study:

1) **Study Title**: Transition and Negotiation of Gender-Role Identity: The Experience of the Indian Air Force Women Pilots.

2) **Researcher**: Kavita Rai

3) **Purpose of the study**: The immediate aim of the proposed study is explore the impact of masculine job like military flying on the women pilots of the Indian Air Force and also how they negotiate their gender-role identity in this male preserve.

4) **Significance of the study**: The results of this study would help in gaining insight into the lives of the women involved in a male dominated profession and what constructs the femininity of women who are not doing gender.

5) **Duration of the interview**: 30 to 45 minutes

6) **Procedure**: You will be interviewed on the questions relevant to this study and your responses will be tape recorded. After the information you provide is analyzed the recording of the interview will be discarded.

7) **Confidentiality**: Your identity and the information you provide to will remain confidential at all times.
When this study is complete you will be provided with the results of the study if you request them, and you will be free to ask any questions. Your participation is voluntary. Please sign in the space given below if you have understood your rights and you agree to participate in this study.

Name (Initials):

Signature:

If you have any further questions concerning this study please feel free to contact us:

Researcher: Kavita Rai

Email: kavita.rai@mail.res.christunversity.in
Appendix- B
Interview Guide
The interviews were conducted keeping the following areas in focus:

- What kind of a childhood you had?
- Describing about your parents, give me the details of your upbringing?
- What did you dream of becoming during your childhood?
- What was the reason for choosing air force flying as a career?
- What was your parent’s reaction to your choice of career?
- How did you perceive this profession before joining the training?
- Describe the kind of person you were before entering Air Force?
- Use three adjectives to describe yourself before you join training?
- What was the nature of the training and how you coped up with it?
- In the uniform, you are yourself or do you try to be like your male counterparts?
- How did you see yourself as a girl before joining training?
- Did you notice some changes in your personality or the way you think and if so what contributed to it?
- What was the influence of training and service on your body?
• What your parents and friends saw in you after training?

• Since your job requires a lot of mobility, so is mobility connected to your sense of independence?

• How do you play so many roles?

• Does a non-traditional career influence the morals?

• How is your equation with men?

• Has your career influenced your other relationships?

• Have you experienced some ideological shift?

• Did you ever experiencing stretching yourself beyond your perceived limits?

• Use three adjectives to describe as to how you are now?