



Men Over Merit: Gendering Images of Power and Competence in the Military

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Abstract

As potent symbols of power and the state, military organisations and their personnel composition have important implications for the construction of gender images in broader society. The question of who can (or should) participate in the military has further developed into a cultural and political flashpoint amidst simultaneous trends of demographic decline and militarisation in democracies throughout the world. These trends have been particularly pronounced in Japan, where the government has claimed to address the resulting recruitment shortages by hiring more female personnel. This article examines why the share of women in the country's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) remains curiously low, nevertheless. Based on previously undisclosed admissions data from the military academy whose graduates dominate the SDF's senior leadership, this article shows how gender-specific recruitment targets have amounted to a system of affirmative action for male applicants, where the path to admission for women has proven up to six times more competitive. Contrary to entrenched notions of a link between masculinity and military prowess, this article demonstrates how artificially maintaining a male-dominated composition of the SDF leadership has come at the detriment to the organisation's own meritocratic principles, undermining the academic and physical standards the recruitment process purports to uphold. This article thus introduces a novel claim to the literature on the theoretical determinants of gender composition in military organisations: The more meritocratic the recruitment process, the more balanced the share of male and female personnel.

Keywords Women · gender · recruitment · military · Japan · Self-defense forces

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Introduction

The question of who can (or should) participate in the military has proven a persistent cultural and political flashpoint in democracies throughout the world. Considering the potent image of the military and the soldier as representatives of the state (Enloe, 2000), and a tendency among political leaders to claim authority by emphasising affinity with the military (Belkin, 2012), the answer to this question is evidently about more than just national security. It is about the construction of images of power and competence, as well as social stratification in the form of tiered privileges and obligations of citizenship.

In recent years, debates around the composition of military personnel have gained further salience due to a global concurrence of militarisation on the one hand and recruitment shortages caused by demographic decline on the other. Wealthy democracies around the world are dramatically expanding military budgets and capabilities, increasing not only ‘hard’ power, but also the ‘soft’ symbolic influence which military organisations inevitably exert on society. At the same time, demographic changes and a trend away from conscription systems in many of these countries have made filling the ranks of these organisations increasingly difficult.

This concurrence of militarisation and recruitment shortages has prompted contentious public debates about whether and how to expand the pool of potential recruits. Debates surrounding the role of women, gay men, and most recently transgender persons in the military have received outsized media attention, even fuelling major political campaigns.

While proponents of a further expansion of the potential recruitment pool for militaries often frame the issue as a matter of rights and representation, opponents tend to frame it as a matter of rights versus readiness. In the latter narrative, as Carreiras (2006, p. 86) explains, ‘democratic values of equality and nondiscrimination are weighted against those of military necessity and readiness, two sets of values considered to be incompatible’.

To investigate the relationship between representation and merit in military organisations, this article examines the case of Japan, where the combination of a military buildup and recruitment shortages has been particularly pronounced. Against the backdrop of severe demographic decline, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in 2024 only managed to hire 51% of the declared recruitment target (Tajima, 2024), at the same time as the government is working to double its defence budget and expand military capabilities (Dooley & Ueno, 2022). Even in recruitment categories where applicant numbers still outnumber available positions, this has led to concerns about the declining competitiveness dragging down the quality of new recruits.

In fact, Japan presents a compelling model case to test the theoretical determinants of representation in military organisations even beyond the concurrence of a military buildup and recruitment shortages. Virtually all determinants proposed in the literature on women’s military participation, in particular, can be observed in the country: It features an all-volunteer force structure, an increased threat perception, low unemployment among men, technological developments that favour ‘brain’ over ‘brawn’, and a legal framework prohibiting gender-based discrimination on the labour market (Segal, 1995; Carreiras, 2006; Sandhoff et al., 2010). Not only are all these determi-

nants theorised to contribute to a rising share of women in the military, they are also thought to override cultural and political ideologies which might be at odds with such an increase (Segal, 1995; Obradovic, 2014).

But while the Japanese government has indeed declared to make recruiting more women in the military a core personnel strategy and announced corresponding target figures (Ministry of Defense, 2025, p. 449), in practice these efforts continue to be limited. In the year 2024 women accounted for only 17.3% of new SDF recruits, leaving the share of female personnel in the entire organisation at no more than 9.1% (Ministry of Defense, 2025, p. 449). This figure trails both women's participation in the broader Japanese labour market, where women in 2024 accounted for 27.6% of permanent employment contracts (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2025, p. 1), as well as the corresponding figure in most comparable militaries. Among the militaries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, for instance, the average share of female personnel already stood at 12.7% in 2022 (NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives, 2022, p. 10).

This article interrogates the above divergence between theory and reality, asking why the share of female personnel in Japan's SDF remains low compared to women's participation in both the broader Japanese labour market and in comparable armed forces, despite the government's declaration to increase female recruitment and the concurrence of virtually all conditions theorised to prompt such an increase. It does so by examining the recruitment system at Japan's National Defense Academy (NDA), a joint military academy whose graduates dominate the SDF's senior leadership.

Based on an analysis of previously undisclosed NDA admissions data, obtained during 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork at the academy, this article argues that contrary to the government's declared intent, the SDF is actively inhibiting rather than supporting the recruitment of female personnel. It does so by maintaining caps on the share of female recruits in crucial employment categories, such as notably at the influential military academy. Focussing on recruitment practices, in other words, this article utilises a structuralist approach to show how governments constrain the construction of gender in broader society.

An analysis of the caps on female NDA students reveals an SDF recruitment policy which has for decades prioritised men over merit. This prioritisation amounts to a formalised system of affirmative action for men, where the path to admission for female applicants has proven up to six times as competitive as for their male peers. Artificially maintaining a male-dominated composition of the SDF and its leadership, accordingly, has come at the detriment to the organisation's own meritocratic principles, undermining the academic and physical standards the recruitment process purports to uphold.

In contributing to the literature on the theoretical determinants of gender composition in military organisations, this article makes a simple and novel claim: All else equal, the more meritocratic a military's recruitment process, the more balanced the share of male and female personnel. Since there is currently no major military in which female personnel outnumber male personnel, at least for now this amounts to the claim that a more meritocratic recruitment process should increase the number of female personnel.

More broadly, this article also contributes to our understanding of how images of power and competence in the military affect the construction of gender in society more broadly. It thus provides further evidence for the ‘cross-fertilisation between military and civilian constructions of gender’ (Woodward & Duncanson, 2017, p. 4), a topic demanding more research attention in an era of accelerating militarisation.

Literature Review

The intersection between studies on military and gender issues has in the past few decades become a prominent field of scholarly debate. An obvious starting point for such inquiries is the fact that women’s participation in military organisations throughout the world strongly lags behind participation rates in the wider labor market. Indeed, the military is often referred to as a ‘masculine’ space (Kovitz, 2003; Woodward & Duncanson, 2017), or even ‘the most prototypically masculine of all social institutions’ (Segal, 1995, p. 758).

Some researchers have sought to challenge this notion of the masculine military by drawing the focus on the often forgotten or even actively hidden history of women’s participation in warfare (Meyer, 1996; Hampf, 2010; Archer, 2017). Others have sought to challenge this notion by disputing the idea that men are somehow inherently suited for warfare (Kovitz, 2003), or by demonstrating that there is no such thing as a single military masculinity (Higate, 2003). Nevertheless, the fact remains that women are underrepresented in militaries around the world both in numerical terms and in terms of the opportunities they have within these organisations (Carreiras, 2006).

The need to explain why women are underrepresented in military organisations has become more obvious in most democracies with the advance of women’s participation in the broader labor market, as well as the spread of legal provisions prohibiting gender-based discrimination by employers. Academic contributions on this issue have largely focussed on how women in the military are held back by the gendered nature of military culture, of cultural images of the soldier, and of economic structures in the broader society. Still, the idea that the lack of female representation can be explained by certain traits inherent to the female sex has retained significant and persistent cultural and political support.

Carreiras and Kümmel (2008, p. 32) refer to proponents of the latter argument as ‘military traditionalists’, who believe that ‘factors like physical strength, menstruation, pregnancy, emotionality, and ability to perform under stress’ ‘make women less effective combatants’. Recently, the military traditionalist argument was most prominently on public display leading up to the Senate confirmation hearing of U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in 2025, who in a book published the year before claimed that women were meant to be ‘life-givers’, and as such did not belong in the military and particularly not in combat roles (Popli, 2025). Defending his remarks in the face of significant criticism, he claimed that efforts to increase the share of female military personnel had led to gender-based physical fitness standards, taking a toll on military effectiveness (Popli, 2025).

Secretary Hegseth's depiction of women's military participation amounts to a reiteration of the rights versus readiness argument, where the forced integration or simply 'the presence of women is seen as jeopardizing the effectiveness of the forces' (Carreiras, 2006, p. 87). The intellectual roots of this argument can be traced back to some of the most prominent sociologists of the military, such as Samuel Huntington (1957) and Charles Moskos (1993, p. 90), the latter of whom complained that 'political leaders and scholars have come to think of the military as a social laboratory, in which charged debates over gender roles and homosexuality and national service can not only be addressed but possibly resolved'.

Even as academic contributions from a gender studies perspective have largely focussed on explaining how such military traditionalist views themselves (as opposed to physiological differences between men and women) have kept women out of military organisations, feminist researchers have arrived at very different conclusions on what the consequence of this finding should be.

Liberal feminists have focussed on 'the right to fight', arguing that whatever one thinks of the military, opening all major government institutions to the participation of women is a matter of principle (Kennedy-Pipe, 2017). Beyond rights, liberal feminists have also emphasised that military diversity and representation reflects positively on the state and society, and can even be beneficial to operational capabilities (Skjelsbæk & Tryggstad, 2009).

Meanwhile, anti-militarist feminists have focussed on 'militarism's destructive power and militaries as misogynist institutions' (Duncanson, 2017, p. 40). While pointing out the various ways in which militarism and militaries discriminate against women, anti-militarist feminists have argued that 'it is naïve to assume that the integration of women into militaries will challenge this war system' (Duncanson, 2017, p. 41).

Despite the obvious rift between these two intellectual traditions, they share a foundational assumption: That the issue of women in the military is worth studying because the military is both a gendered and gendering institution (Carreiras, 2006, p. 40; Belkin, 2012). In other words, military organisations, who are often among the largest employers in their respective countries, both reflect and affect gender stratification in broader society. As Vuic (2017, p. 2) succinctly points out, you cannot understand the history of the military and warfare without looking at gender, and you cannot understand the construction of gender without looking at the military and warfare.

The argument to study the intersection of military organisations and gender has gained further salience in recent years as countries across the globe have moved to increase the budget, capabilities and status of their militaries. World military expenditure increased by 9.4% in real terms from 2023 to 2024, marking the largest annual increase since at least the end of the cold war (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2025). As military footprints grow, questions revolving around who gets to participate in the military, who gets to lead the military, and what role military personnel should play in domestic society have become central points of contention.

Beyond the myriad subtle ways in which military personnel composition affects broader culture and society, there are also plenty of more immediate consequences.

If a commander in chief orders the military to seize control of parliament to silence the opposition, as occurred in South Korea in 2024, do partisan affiliations among soldiers affect their decision between upholding the chain of command or the constitution? If military troops are ordered to fire live ammunition at domestic protestors, as occurred in Peru in 2022 (and as suggested by the U.S. president in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in 2020), does a gap in ethnic composition between protestors and military personnel affect the lethality of the military's response? If a flurry of sexual harassment scandals threatens public support for a military, such as occurred in Japan in 2022, does the gender makeup of the senior military leadership affect the extent to which it is willing to implement substantial reform?

Policies on the composition of military personnel also carry consequences for our understanding of representation issues in society more broadly. Should affirmative action in the military be allowed, even as it is ruled unconstitutional in civilian society, because the 'potentially distinct interests' of the military entitle it to benefit from the operational benefits of diversity, as suggested by a 2023 U.S. Supreme Court ruling (Hartocollis, 2023)? Or reversely, should affirmative action be abolished exclusively in the military, even if it is considered desirable in civilian society, because meeting the functional demands of national security overrides the rights and equality concerns of liberal host societies, as suggested by what is considered the foundational study of civil-military relations (Huntington, 1957)? Depending on the argument, affirmative action is portrayed as either beneficial or detrimental to operational performance.

The most influential and comprehensive framework trying to determine what variables affect women's participation in military organisations was proposed by Mady Segal (1995). Although rather than a single framework, it is perhaps more accurate to describe the study as a list of variables correlating with women's military participation, which Segal divides into three categories: Military, social structure, and culture.

In the military category, Segal argues that women's military roles increase (both in combat and noncombat functions) when national security is threatened and not enough qualified men can be mobilised. This process is cyclical, she argues, as societies tend to engage in 'a process of cultural amnesia of the contributions women made' and women's military participation is restricted again after wars wind down (Segal, 1995, p. 761). In contrast to conscription systems, she adds, all-volunteer forces should aggravate male recruitment shortages, increasing women's participation (Segal, 1995, p. 765). The military category also includes the hypothesis that technological advances have enabled greater women's participation, as 'brainpower' becomes more important than 'brawn' in the military profession (Segal, 1995, p. 762) and the 'combat to support ratio' within militaries decreases (Segal, 1995, p. 764).

In the social structure category, Segal hypothesises that a shortage of men during periods of demographic decline should lead to an increase in the recruitment of female personnel (Segal, 1995, p. 766). Since similar dynamics structure the civilian labour market, she adds, a larger share of women in the civilian labour market should be mirrored by more women in military roles (Segal, 1995, p. 766). As for economic factors, Segal argues, high unemployment rates should lead to a steady supply of male military recruits, reducing opportunities for women, whereas economic expansion draws women into both civilian and military labour markets (Segal, 1995, p.

767). Further, she argues that the greater the responsibilities of women in their families, the less women are represented in the military (Segal, 1995, p. 768).

In the culture category, Segal points out differences in the extent to which societies stress gender equality or gender differences. She argues that the 'greater the emphasis on ascription by gender (and thereby the less emphasis on individual differences), the more limited women's military role' (Segal, 1995, p. 768). Reversely, she adds, more egalitarian social values on gender should lead to higher women's military participation (Segal, 1995, p. 769). In a similar vein, Segal also proposes that 'religious fundamentalism' and traditional family values inhibit women's military participation.

While the correlations Segal proposed in the military category have since been widely picked up in the related literature, the latter two categories have received significantly less attention. As political scientists like to point out, using culture in particular as an explanatory variable carries the risk of making a tautological (or at least very uninspiring) argument, where low women's military participation is explained by the belief that there should be low women's military participation. Similarly, Carreiras (2006, p. 22) has argued that cultural values are difficult to operationalise, and even more difficult to systematically compare across countries.

Although Segal's study is not primarily focussed on determining the relative weight of the proposed relationships, her study concludes by suggesting that military variables are likely to override cultural variables when multiple sets of variables are at odds (Segal, 1995, p. 771). In a large comparative study, Obradovic (2014, p. 8) has provided evidence for this hypothesis, arguing that national security demands have led governments to 'no longer surrender to parochial gendered division of the roles, but rather integrate women to meet the recruitment numbers'.

Further cross-national studies building on Segal's initial work have added more variables to the list, such as a fourth category of political variables (Iskra et al., 2002; Sandhoff et al., 2010). This category includes the idea that stable and legitimate civilian governments are conducive to women's military participation, whereas substantial influence by the military over the political process inhibits it. The new category also includes the claim that liberal political ideology or laws preventing gender discrimination increase women's military participation.

This article seeks to build on the above literature by examining a scenario where women's military participation continues to be subdued, despite the congruence of virtually all the previously proposed conditions associated with an increase in such participation. It does so by adding a new variable to the military category of Segal's initial model, focussed on the way gender is emphasised in the recruitment process.

Method

To add to our understanding of what determines the degree of women's military participation, this article offers an analysis of a central component of the recruitment system for the Japanese SDF. It revolves around admissions data from the NDA, the country's joint military officer academy. A four-year university-level institution whose graduates go on to serve as officers in all three branches of the SDF, the NDA is directly administered by the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and headed by a civilian president. Although NDA graduates only make up roughly a quarter of the SDF offi-

cer corps (Bōei handobukku henshū iinkai, 2018, p. 206), they are estimated to constitute about 90% of the SDF's generals (Satō, 2021, p. 231). Indeed, a former NDA president even warned that 'the complete monopolizing' of the SDF leadership by academy graduates constituted a too narrow set of experiences and education at the organisation's helm (Eldridge, 2017). In any case, the NDA's influence on the Japanese military arguably surpasses that of any other single educational institution, providing the key to understanding the construction of the SDF's organisational culture.

While admissions data ranging from the first cohort of NDA students in 1953 leading up to the year 2003 had already been public previously (Bōeidaigakkō gojūnenshi hensan jigyō iinkai, 2004, p. 960; Kawano, 2008), data on the years from 2004 to 2024 was only made available for this study during 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork at the NDA in 2023 and 2024. Academic affiliation at the academy as a 'cooperating researcher' (*kyōdō kenkyūin*) allowed for the development of personal relationships and trust necessary to access the admissions data and overcome the methodological limitations reported by previous civilian studies on the NDA (Nogami, 2021, p. 187). This affiliation also allowed for the collection of participant observation and interview data which, although not a central method in this article, provided contextualising information for the analysis of admissions data.

Looking beyond the official rhetoric on increasing female recruitment, an analysis of the NDA admissions data offers an insight into how gender continues to be a prohibitive factor in the selection of SDF personnel. This discrepancy between the government's rhetoric and practice, as detailed in the findings below, demonstrates the utility of examining recruitment processes in the effort to formulate theoretical assumptions on women's participation in military organisations.

The research conducted for this article has been approved by the [Departmental Research Ethics Committee of the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford]. Information on this research was shared in advance with the NDA administration, consent to publish the admissions data was obtained orally with the relevant staff, and the article was submitted for review to the academy prior to publication as part of the research and affiliation conditions.

The remainder of the article will present the research results in two sections. The first section outlines how demographic changes have led to severe recruitment shortages in the SDF, how the government has responded by declaring to increase the recruitment of female personnel, and how high-profile sexual harassment scandals have both inhibited female recruitment and exposed the problems caused by a male-dominated organisational culture.

The second section presents an analysis of NDA admission data, revealing the discrepancy between the stated policy and the gendered nature of the recruitment for the SDF's most senior leadership.

Finally, the discussion section will outline how these findings contribute a novel theoretical assumption to our understanding of what determines the degree of women's participation in military organisations.

Findings

Women's Military Participation in Japan: Demography, Policy, and Scandals

Japan presents a compelling case study on women's participation in the military, as a concurrence of a rapid military buildup and severe demographic decline in the country has sparked debates about whether an increase in female personnel could alleviate recruitment shortages. Motivated by what it considers an increasingly hostile neighbourhood, the Japanese government in 2022 announced the doubling of its defence budget and an expansion of military capabilities, upending multiple postwar precedents and setting the country on course to become the third-largest military spender in the world (Dooley & Ueno, 2022; Rich & Hida, 2023).

This military buildup has run into significant challenges, however, as decades of notoriously low birthrates in Japan have left the SDF facing a decimated pool of potential recruits. In one such data point, the number of 18-year-olds in Japan has fallen from a peak of 2,049,471 in the year 1992 to just 1,063,451 in 2024, amounting to a drop of 48% in just 32 years (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2024). Accordingly, in 2023 the SDF found that it had only managed to recruit a record-low 51% of its annual target figure, a more than 15-point drop from the previous year (Tajima, 2024).

The falling ratio of applications to employment offers has left the SDF struggling with a decline in recruitment quality, even in positions where it is still able to meet its recruitment targets (Uchida, 2023). Regardless of the SDF's assurances that standards remain unchanged, less competition has simply made it easier to join the organisation. This trend will only intensify, as Japan's population of 18-year olds is projected to drop by another 23% from the 2024 figure by the year 2040 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2025, p. 4).

Responding to the growing concerns among the SDF leadership, government officials have scrambled to make the SDF a more attractive place to work. Next to measures increasing personnel salaries, budget has also been allocated to equip SDF vessels with new communications technology to allow crew members to stay in touch with their families during longer deployments (Fujita, 2024). Additionally, following an advisory report from 2023, the ministry announced it was reviewing recruitment regulations that 'lacked rationality', such as the requirement for new female recruits to cut their hair short, and for male recruits to adopt a buzzcut for their first assignment (Matsuura, 2024).

But in what seemed like the most sustained effort to ramp up recruitment, the government has announced measures specifically targeting women interested in joining the SDF. Building on an increase in the share of female personnel from 5.7% in 2014 to 9.1% in 2024, the MOD has declared a goal to further raise this figure to 12% by 2030 (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2023; Ministry of Defense, 2025, p. 449). Next to the change in haircut regulations, the ministry has announced to achieve this goal by making work in the SDF more compatible with child and family care, such as through improved work-life balance, introducing flexible working hours as well as remote work, and setting up nurseries at several camps and bases (Ministry of Defense, 2025, p. 515).

These measures to increase female recruitment have been overshadowed, however, by a flurry of sexual harassment cases involving female SDF personnel that were widely broadcast in national media. The most prominent among these cases was that of Rina Ganoi, who was sexually harassed by multiple male colleagues while she worked in the SDF. After her internal complaints were ignored by military authorities, Ganoi successfully took her fight for accountability public in 2022, ultimately forcing even the prime minister to acknowledge an inappropriate system of dealing with sexual harassment cases within the SDF (Odanaka, 2022). Ganoi's campaign also prompted the MOD to conduct an internal survey in the SDF which identified no less than 179 further alleged cases of sexual harassment (Tajima, 2023).

Unsurprisingly, the sustained media coverage on the 'hotbed of sexual harassment' (Odanaka, 2022) in the SDF undermined the organisation's efforts to appeal to potential female recruits. Already by March 2023 the annual figure of women applying to join the SDF had decreased by 12% compared to the previous year, capping several years of steady growth in the years before (Murakami & Kelly, 2024). The reputational damage to the SDF was symbolised aptly in 2024, when Ganoi was honoured with an award by the U.S. Secretary of State in the White House for the courage she displayed in the struggle for justice against her own government and employer (Kyodo News, 2024).

Even if government officials quickly pledged measures to address the issue of sexual harassment in the SDF, it was unclear how persuasive these statements seemed in the eyes of potential female recruits who continued to follow the fallout in the news. In 2023 a government-appointed panel of experts concluded that insufficient and superficial anti-harassment training for SDF personnel was contributing to cultural problems within the organisation (Murakami & Kelly, 2024). A year later, it was reported that the government had still not taken any action on the panel's key recommendation to implement a centralised oversight system for such training (Murakami & Kelly, 2024).

With the key leadership positions in the SDF entirely dominated by men, addressing the challenges female personnel encountered from within the organisation did not appear to feature particularly high on the list of priorities. As Frühstück (2007, p. 97) points out, the experience of women in the SDF resembled that of 'pioneers and necessarily loners, who struggle to keep up with their male peers in a masculinist, potentially hostile world'. To this day, no female SDF officer has ever served as the Chief of Staff of any of the three branches or the joint staff, and only a handful of women have been promoted to the rank of general. Further down the ranks, too, in 2023 women comprised only 4.5% of SDF officers with the rank of field officer or higher (Ministry of Defense, 2025, p. 449).

Even as most positions in the SDF have in theory opened up to women since the turn of the century, researchers have pointed out that these changes have occurred for virtually any other reason than gender equality considerations. Instead, Satō (2022, p. 115; translation by the author) argues, the gradual integration of women into the organisation was driven by a desire among SDF officials to compensate for the lack of male recruits, to let men do 'manly' jobs, to improve the reputation of the SDF (and by extension the government) both domestically and globally, and to camouflage politically controversial overseas deployments.

At the NDA, too, as the following analysis demonstrates, the gradual integration of women reflects a reluctant response to exogenous pressure and increasingly severe recruitment shortages, rather than a desire to increase the number of female SDF personnel and level the playing field for women hoping to join the organisation's leadership. Indeed, rather than seeking avenues to boost the number of female military officers, the government continues to actively inhibit rather than encourage its growth.

Capping Female Recruitment at the NDA

The first cohort of female students at the NDA was admitted in 1992, four decades after the academy's establishment. Dropping the ban on female students was a direct consequence of Japan's participation in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1980. Ratified in 1985 as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL), this 'exogenous shock' (Brinton, 1993, p. 237) made barring women from entering the organisation whose graduates dominated the SDF's senior leadership untenable and thus opened up an important pathway for female officers to enter the top ranks of the organisation (Satō, 2022, p. 109).

But if the EEOL opened the door for women to join the NDA, it only managed to open it just a crack. The recruitment target for female students in the 1992 cohort was set at roughly 7% of the student body, mandating that a limited 'women's bracket' (*josei waku*) should make up no more than around 34 of the total 500 incoming students (Bōeidaigakkō gojūnenshi hensan jigyō iinkai, 2004, p. 960). In other words, the MOD's legal interpretation seemed to be that while banning female students at the NDA violated the EEOL's prohibition of gender-based discrimination at the workplace, imposing a cap on female students did not. An official justification for this interpretation, or even an explanation of the rationale behind gender-based recruitment caps, has not been issued since.

Seemingly unbothered by the legal tenuousness of the cap on female students, the NDA leadership was certainly aware of how this arrangement served as a drag on academic abilities in the student body. As female applicants had to compete for a far more limited number of admission offers than their male counterparts, the NDA's civilian lecturers quickly noticed that male students on average proved less academically capable. This gap in abilities was tolerated by the administration until the full effect of the country's demographic change made it impossible to ignore.

When the number of applicants to the NDA fell from a peak of 17,188 in 2013 to 10,638 in 2022, amounting to no less than a 38% drop, a 'sense of crisis' developed among academy officials (Uchida, 2023, translation by author). Scrambling to maintain 'student quality' in the face of declining competitiveness, the administration sought to further tap into the pool of competitive female applicants by gradually expanding the 'women's bracket' (Uchida, 2023, translation by author). With the most recent expansion from 15 to 21% of the student body in 2023, the number of female students in each new cohort was thus elevated from 70 to 100 of the total 480.

Notably, the discussion concerning the struggle to maintain sufficient 'student quality' revolved almost entirely around academic abilities. While the NDA curricu-

lum on campus emphasises more than just academic development, this is not necessarily true for the admissions process. In the admissions process, physical abilities, motivation, leadership experience, and extra-curricular activities play virtually no role at all in the case of at least half the admission offers each year.

In the year 2024, there were three different admission tracks through which prospective students could enter the academy: The general employment examination, the recommendation employment examination, and the comprehensive selection employment examination. All three tracks involved a written examination, an oral examination, and a physical examination. Additionally, the recommendation track factored in a recommendation letter, while the comprehensive track factored in a variety of practical tests, involving fitness, problem-solving, and group tasks.

Importantly, however, the obligatory physical examination for applicants of all three tracks did not constitute a part of the competitive selection system, but merely served to delineate a baseline which applicants needed to clear. Among other requirements, applicants needed to prove that they were of a minimum height, did not cross lower or upper weight limits depending on their height, and did not have physical disabilities, 'a large number of cavities or missing teeth', or tattoos (Ministry of Defense, 2024; translation by the author). If applicants cleared these barriers, the details of their 'performance' in this examination did not affect their ranking vis-a-vis other applicants.

Although the introduction of the recommendation track in 1992 and comprehensive track in 2012 represent efforts by the NDA to afford non-academic elements more importance in the admissions system, a majority of incoming student cohorts each year continues to be admitted without their physical abilities considered in the competitive selection process. Only 10% of the incoming first-year cohort in 2024 entered through the comprehensive selection track, which considers how applicants perform in physical fitness tests. In contrast, 50% of students entered through the general track and 40% through the recommendation track. Recommenders in the latter track could, of course, refer to an applicant's successful participation in sports clubs or competitions, but such testaments to physical abilities were neither required nor tested in this category.

In practice, this meant that for a majority of admission offers in the year 2024, there was no need at all to demonstrate competitive physical abilities, provided that applicants passed certain minimum requirements. In other words, the NDA's own admission system seemed to signal that the successful applicant, and thus the desirable future SDF officer, was defined chiefly by their competitive academic abilities.

In this light, it seems particularly curious that the effort to curate the gender composition of the NDA's student body has taken precedence over the effort to maximise 'student quality' as per the academy's own definition. Indeed, as the breakdown of the admission data below reveals, the extent to which this prioritisation has proven detrimental to academic abilities among the NDA student body is extraordinary.

The Gender Gap in the NDA's Admission System

Technically, the NDA's admissions system consists not just of three tracks, but of six. Each of the academy's three admission tracks (general, recommendation, and

comprehensive), are further divided into two sub-tracks, one for applicants hoping to major in social science and humanities, and another for those hoping to major in science and technology. Depending on the major, applicants sit different written examinations.

Every year the NDA sets recruitment targets for each of these six sub-tracks, effectively separating the applicants into different groups. Applicants then compete for the limited admission slots only with the other applicants in their specific sub-track. Depending on the recruitment target and the number of applicants, accordingly, the competitiveness rate (the rate of applicants to admission offers) varies by sub-track. In sub-tracks where there are fewer applicants, higher recruitments targets, or a combination of both, students may encounter a less competitive path to an admission offer than applicants in other sub-tracks.

In practice, however, each of the six admission sub-tracks are further divided into two additional categories: Male and female applicants. For each of the six sub-tracks, the academy sets two separate recruitment targets for male and female applicants. Even if male and female applicants sit the exact same examination, they therefore vie for separate admission slots. Female applicants compete exclusively with other female applicants, while male applicants compete only with other male applicants. Here, too, the competitiveness rate varies depending on the number of applicants and the recruitment target.

In the absence of publicly available data on absolute (as opposed to relative) examination performance such as test scores, the gaps between male and female competitiveness rates offer an important insight into the extent to which an applicant's gender affects their likelihood to be admitted to the NDA. Although it is possible that there are differences in the range and distribution of test scores between the two groups of male and female applicants sitting the same examination, there is no reason to assume such differences exist at a scale significant and consistent enough to invalidate competitiveness rates as a proxy for difficulty of gaining admission.

For the vast majority of incoming cohorts since female students were first admitted to the NDA in 1992, the cap on the share of women among incoming cohorts has made competitiveness rates for female applicants substantially higher than those among their male peers, despite male applicants consistently outnumbering female applicants in all six sub-tracks. Even as the expansion of the 'women's bracket' to 21% in 2023 has alleviated these differences to a considerable extent, competitiveness rates among female applicants has still remained higher for half of the admission slots since.

The largest group among the 2024 admission cohort entered through the general examination track, with a recruitment target of 240 students (followed by 190 in the recommendation track and 50 in the comprehensive track). Among these 240 students, making up half of the entire cohort, the recruitment target stipulated 45 students joining through the social science and humanities sub-track, and 195 students through the science and technology sub-track.

In the science and technology sub-track of the general employment examination, with the largest intake among all sub-tracks, the recruitment target of 195 students was to be composed of 165 men and 30 women. 3,936 male applicants sat for the examination, of which 716 received admission offers. 1,199 female applicants sat

for the examination, of which 178 received offers. For the men, this amounted to a competitiveness rate of roughly five examination takers for every admission. For the women, it amounted to a rate of roughly seven examination takers for every admission. Although significant, this gap was nowhere near as pronounced as in the social science and humanities sub-track.

In the social science and humanities sub-track of the general employment examination, the composition of the 45 targeted students was to consist of 35 men and 10 women. 1.914 male applicants sat for the examination, of which 119 received admission offers. 1.701 female applicants sat for the examination, of which 43 received offers. This amounted to a competitiveness rate of 16:1 among the male examination takers, and a rate of 40:1 among the women.

In other words, when the new cohort of first-years entered the NDA campus in April 2024, male and female students who entered through the same social science and humanities sub-track of the general examination had overcome vastly different odds to get there. Statistically speaking, each male student had to prove himself the most qualified among 16 examination takers, whereas each female student had to be the most qualified among 40, a competitiveness rate more than two and a half times higher.

Despite this profound difference in the competitiveness rates between male and female applicants in the general examination's social science and humanities sub-track, the figures for the 2024 cohort actually represent an ongoing alignment in the competitiveness rates as a result of the gradual expansion of the 'women's bracket'. Among past cohorts, this gap was considerably larger.

In 1992, the first year where women were admitted to the academy, the competitiveness rate for men in the general examination's social science and humanities sub-track stood at 18:1, compared to 50:1 for the the women. From these figures, which are notably similar to those of the 2024 cohort detailed above, the gap dramatically widened with an increase in the number of female applicants in the following years.

Within eight years, the number of female applicants sitting for the general employment examination's social science and humanities sub-track had more than doubled from 701 in the year 1992 to 1.444 in the year 2000. Because the number of admission offers in this sub-track had only increased from 14 to 22 in this period, however, the competitiveness rate climbed from 50:1 to 66:1.

At the same time, the number of male exam takers in this category had only increased marginally, from 3.503 in the year 1992 to 3.767 in the year 2000. Yet, admission offers for men during this period also increased from 193 to 242. Accordingly, the competitiveness rate among male applicants in this category actually decreased from 18:1 to 16:1.

Among the cohort of first-year students in the year 2000, then, the competitiveness rate among male students who entered through the general examination's social science and humanities sub-track stood at 16:1, compared to the female rate of 66:1, a rate more than four times as high.

The gap between male and female competitiveness rates in the social science and humanities track of the general examination reached its peak in the year 2012. While the male rate stood at 14:1, with 220 admission offers for 3.177 examination takers, the female rate reached 87:1, with 22 admission offers for 1.906 examination takers.

Table 1 Admission Statistics by Gender in the Social Science and Humanities Track of the NDA's General Examination (Selected Cohorts)

	Men			Women		
	Exam. Takers	Offers	Comp. Rate	Exam. Takers	Offers	Comp. Rate
1992	3.503	193	18:1	701	14	50:1
2000	3.767	242	16:1	1.444	22	66:1
2012	3.177	220	14:1	1.906	22	87:1
2024	1.914	119	16:1	1.701	43	40:1

Securing a spot in this track as a female applicant that year, therefore, proved to be six times as competitive as it was for a male applicant (Table 1).

Compared to the general examination track, the gap between the competitiveness rates for men and women in the newer recommendation and comprehensive tracks have not been quite as pronounced. In fact, in the year 2024 the competitiveness rate for female applicants was slightly lower than the male one in all four of the sub-tracks. This was a direct result of the decision to expand the 'women's bracket' to 21% in 2023, prior to which female applicants faced higher competitiveness rates than their male counterparts in most of the years since the inception of the recommendation and comprehensive tracks in 2004 and 2013 respectively. In the years 2023 and 2024, therefore, being admitted through the recommendation or comprehensive track as a female applicant actually proved slightly less competitive than as a male applicant.

Facing a decline in academic abilities among the NDA student body, the decision by administration officials to raise the cap on female recruitment by another 6% in 2023 has shrunk the gap in competitiveness rates in every single one of the six admission tracks. With smaller gaps in competitiveness rates, fewer underperforming applicants (by the examination system's own measures) received an admission offer only because of the advantage provided by their gender.

In other words, the smaller the gap in competitiveness rates between male and female applicants, the more the admissions system approaches the principal of meritocracy. The expansion of the 'women's bracket', therefore, has effectively raised the academic quality of the student body, even as the most recent drop in competitiveness rates among female applicants in the recommendation and comprehensive tracks is threatening to erode this effect again by now offering female applicants an advantage based on their gender in these admission tracks. Ironically, this meant that in the case of half of all admission slots in 2024 the system designed to artificially boost the number of male students now made it harder for male applicants to join the NDA precisely because they were men.

Senior NDA officials confirmed that they had anticipated the declining competitiveness gaps, having raised the cap on female recruitment expressly with the purpose of increasing particularly academic abilities in the student body. But if the administration was aware that competitiveness gaps allow underperforming students to enter the academy, it remains puzzling why it did not simply get rid of gendered recruitment targets entirely, thus erasing such gaps once and for all.

Even if the NDA administration has never issued an official justification for the cap on female students, a vast majority of both male and female students and staff interpret the existence of the 'women's bracket' to mean that gender serves as a use-

ful proxy variable for physical abilities. In capping the number of female students, the theory goes, the administration maintains a certain standard of physical abilities at the NDA. As pointed out above, however, this argument is complicated by the fact that physical abilities play only a marginal role in the admissions system, constituting a mandatory competitive factor in the selection of only 10% of the 2024 incoming student cohort.

In fact, in many cases the NDA's current admissions system can serve to actively depress not only academic abilities among the student body, but also physical abilities. In the case of half of the admission slots for the incoming 2024 cohort, a female applicant could have not only been taller and stronger, but also achieved better examination results than a male offer holder in the same application sub-track, and still not be admitted. Let us consider the following hypothetical case of two applicants, one female and one male, who applied in the 2024 cohort through the general examination's social science and humanities track.

In the written examination, the female applicant scored in the top third percentile among the 1.701 female examination takers in her track. Standing 175 cm tall and with an athletic physique, let us say she was a member of her high school's volleyball team, even competing in the national high school championships.

Now let us say that her male counterpart, in contrast, stood only 151 cm tall and weighed 45 kg, barely passing the lower minimum weight limit and with no experience in athletic activities at all. Among the 1.914 male exam takers in this category he managed to score in the sixth percentile.

Because of the gap in competitiveness rates, and because physical traits and abilities are not factored into the competitive selection process of the general examination track, the male applicant in our example would have been awarded an offer for admission while the female applicant would not. Even if the two applicants in this comparison are fictitious, the admission conditions they faced were real, deciding over the fate of hundreds of real applicants.

The above analysis demonstrates that the NDA admissions process neither effectively serves to maximise academic nor physical abilities. Rather than opening up competition to all applicants based on a set of clearly defined yard sticks pertaining to physical, academic, or other abilities, the administration's decision to maintain a 'women's bracket' sustains the idea that gender constitutes a useful enough proxy variable to predict what amounts to a peculiarly nebulous concept of student quality.

In practice, the cap on female recruitment at the NDA has instead amounted over the years to a formalised system of affirmative action for male applicants, in which the objective of sustaining a male-dominated composition of the military leadership directly undermines the principle of meritocracy, even if merit is defined exclusively by the organisation's own selection process.

Discussion

This article has sought to explain why the share of female personnel in the Japanese military continues to trail women's participation in both the country's broader labour market and in comparable militaries, despite a concurrence of virtually all the

theoretical determinants of increased women's military participation proposed in the academic literature. It has done so by investigating recruitment policies and statistics with a focus on the NDA, a joint military academy whose graduates dominate the senior SDF leadership.

The findings show that contrary to the official rhetoric of top-down efforts to increase the share of female military personnel, the Japanese government continues to actively inhibit rather than encourage such an increase. At the NDA, it does so by applying caps on female recruitment, an arrangement which over the past three decades has amounted to a formalised system of affirmative action for male applicants.

This system ensures that the composition of the NDA's student body (and in turn the military's senior leadership) remains male-dominated, even at a substantial cost to precisely those abilities which the selection process is designed to evaluate applicants on. An applicant's gender in the NDA's admission system outweighs not only their academic abilities but also their physical abilities, having made the path to admission for female applicants up to six times more competitive than for their male peers.

If the share of female SDF personnel has increased over the past years, then, it has done so despite the government's position on women in the military, not because of it. A cautious increase in female recruitment caps over the past few years should not be interpreted as growing support for the idea of women in the military, but as weakening resistance to it. Future research will need to address why the government has neither issued an official explanation for this resistance, nor a legal justification for the gender-specific recruitment gaps through which it is implemented.

One possible rationale behind this recruitment policy relates to data showing that female military members are statistically likely to leave their careers earlier than male peers (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020). There is strong reason to doubt, however, whether this justification would be supported by the Japanese electorate and courts, were the NDA to formally adopt it. When a government investigation in 2018 found that several Japanese medical universities had purposefully suppressed female admission numbers because they feared higher dropout rates among female doctors, there was a public outcry and courts ruled that the practice violated gender equality legislation as well as 'the spirit of the constitution' (Tanaka & Shioiri 2022).

In the absence of any formal justification, students and staff at the NDA generally interpret the prioritisation of male applicants as a measure to increase physical abilities among the student body. If this was the objective, however, it is unclear why competitive physical abilities are not simply afforded a greater role in the admissions system, where they were a compulsory part of the competitive selection process in only 10% of the 2024 cohort's admission slots.

Even if concerns about physical abilities were the reason for the NDA's caps on female recruitment, it is disputable whether prioritising physical abilities over academic abilities, or 'brawn' over 'brain', is consistent with the SDF's own assessment of the changing nature of warfare. Against the backdrop of aircraft carriers, remote-controlled drones, nuclear submarines, stealth bombers, and precision-guided missiles, it is evident that ideas of 'expertise' or 'prowess' in the military are subject to change depending on place and time.

To support the theoretical claim made in this article, it is not necessary to propose a universal and static definition of what makes a good soldier. It is sufficient to identify the variables emphasised in the competitive selection process of a military's recruitment system, to determine how the organisation itself measures (and thus defines) merit among applicants. At the NDA, this competitive selection process, and thus the concept of merit among applicants, revolves chiefly around academic abilities, while competitive physical abilities are afforded far less importance.

As the data presented in this article demonstrates, however, the NDA's recruitment process over the past three decades consistently prioritised the advantage afforded to male applicants over the objective of maximising academic and even physical abilities in the student body. At least in the case of Japan's SDF, therefore, an artificially maintained male-dominated composition of the military and its leadership comes at the detriment of the organisation's own meritocratic principles. In other words, the findings suggest that policies which serve to limit the number of female military personnel do not reflect a prioritisation of military effectiveness, but the opposite.

This is the novel theoretical claim based on the Japanese case presented in this article: All else equal, the more meritocratic a military's recruitment process, the more balanced the share of male and female personnel. Seeing as there is currently no major military where female personnel outnumber male personnel, at least for now this amounts to the claim that a more meritocratic recruitment process should increase the number of women in the military.

To be sure, this article does not seek to argue that the degree of meritocratic recruitment is the only determinant of women's military participation, or even the most important. Other determinants proposed in the previous literature may be just as valid, and the relative explanatory power among the proposed variables remains difficult to measure, requiring further cross-national research.

Likewise, it is important to emphasise that the theoretical claim proposed in this article is based exclusively on data from the Japanese military. While this case study is significant on its own, as much as any findings from a study limited to data from a single country, cross-national testing will be necessary to assess whether this hypothesis holds in other military organisations, and how it can be operationalised in countries without formal caps on the number of female recruits.

There is strong reason to assume, however, that anti-meritocratic recruitment and employment patterns which privilege male applicants, students, officer candidates, and soldiers exist in militaries around the world. Beyond formal caps, future research of this type may investigate who is targeted in military recruitment material and events, how government officials narrate military prowess and the desirable soldier, which kind of behaviour and attributes are emphasised in informal military traditions, who is promoted to senior leadership, and why female personnel feature higher drop-out rates than their male peers.

The relevance of investigating how such systems of affirmative action for male personnel in military organisations inhibit rather than uphold meritocratic principles is twofold. Not only does it offer an insight into social stratification in government sectors which are already among the largest employers in many countries and continue to grow at rapid speed throughout the world. The sheer size of military organisations, as well their symbolic power as representatives of the state, also mean that

social stratification within these organisations affects such stratification in broader society. The military, as Carreiras (2006, p. 198) points out, therefore remains a “‘privileged observatory’ of gender dynamics’, relevant far beyond those interested in military recruitment.

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Author contributions This is a single-author study.

Data availability Consent was obtained for the publication of an analysis of the admissions data, but not for the publication of the whole dataset.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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