
Character education and building the nation's character through military conscription

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Abstract

This research aimed to describe the role of military service in building the national character Indonesia needs today. This research employed a qualitative-descriptive approach, utilizing a discourse analysis method. The discourse analysis process was carried out by determining the text or discourse to be analyzed. In this case, the selected texts are "character education" and "military service." "Character education" was chosen because there is a suspicion that the decline of the Indonesian nation is caused by the continuing decline in the quality of its character. The research results indicated that military service is positively correlated with the health of the elderly, especially related to physical health, cognitive abilities, and self-assessment of health. Conscripts who participate based on self-awareness feel that military service is significant. There are several opposing opinions about military service, including the opinion that military service does not protect citizens who refuse it.

Keywords

Character education, military conscription, military service, national character building

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Introduction

Prabowo Subianto, the President of Indonesia, reportedly asked the ministers he had just inaugurated, "Do the people agree if your sons and daughters join the military conscription?" The statement of the President of Indonesia, inaugurated on October 20, 2024, caused controversy because the public assumed that Subianto would enforce military conscription in Indonesia. After the investigation, it was revealed that Subianto's question was fabricated. Despite the false information and widespread opposition, many people expressed that the discussion of military conscription is crucial for the Indonesian nation. Military conscription can develop Indonesian human resources with strong character, which will help lead the nation to the golden generation of 2045.

Character education is a long-term investment for the progress of a nation. A nation can achieve prosperity, stability, and sustainable progress by building individuals with strong character. Character education is carried out to strengthen the values of nationality, religiosity, integrity, cooperation, and independence. In essence, parents play a crucial role in imparting character education to their children. Positive parenting from parents who are full of friendliness has a significant influence on building children's character mediated by religiosity. Religiosity mediates the relationship between positive parenting and friendliness in parental involvement (Kaniušonytė & Laursen, 2022). Character education can also be done non-formally in inquiry learning. For example, the ustadz facilitates students' reflection, processing, and evaluation of what is found in the teaching and learning process. Social interaction between students and facilitators allows students to develop high-level thinking skills that make students think critically and encourage them to continue investigating (Xia & Xu, 2024).

Schools have long been considered an important social context for character education. Hong Kong, for example, recently issued a policy to place moral and character education on its educational agenda, even from an early age. Their policy states that character education should be integrated into core subjects (Cunha et al., 2018). Saudi Arabia also needs changes regarding character education to enable young learners to develop into moral global citizens and create a sustainable future (Osman, 2024). Character education is strengthened through non-learning and learning (Maisyaroh et al., 2023). Character education can be implemented through structured programs, the integration of values across different subjects, and modelling behaviours. This program teaches students about the values of virtue (Lickona, 2013).

In Australia, most (94.6%) of people working in secondary schools believe that character education is more important for 10- to 14-year-olds than outstanding exam results (Kropfleiter et al., 2024). The Latvian value system shows that schools and families share responsibility for children's education. They provide training for both school staff and parents. This training is a prerequisite for effective family-school partnerships to implement character education successfully (Surikova & González, 2022).

The country needs to focus on implementing national character education to create a better world. Schools are an important source for forming and cultivating human goodness in every individual. The society formed by this education will, in turn, become a community that can lead a nation to become a superior nation (Dabdoub et al., 2024). Forming character and instilling values requires the right strategy and systematic, planned, and sustainable efforts. Therefore, the meaning of a professional teacher must place more emphasis on the ability to

adapt to learning situations and identify creative and innovative learning solutions (Montessori et al., 2024).

In the context of character education in Indonesia, although there is a movement of teacher communities to prioritise character education, most students are doubtful about how much character education can positively change students' characters. There is a gap between the aspirations teachers and students hope to achieve and the education they use to prepare for future character education (Sukidin et al., 2022). Character education is implemented through intracurricular and extracurricular activities that support subject competencies. In intracurricular activities, character education is instilled through the learning process. In contrast, in extracurricular activities, character education is carried out through various activities, such as managing cooperatives, scouting, and social awareness (Rindrayani, 2020).

As an idea and as a practice, character education continues to experience a resurgence. For the research agenda on character and virtue to remain relevant, it must demonstrate how it can help address the various threats to humanity that arise from new ethical dilemmas (Kristjánsson et al., 2025). Even the energy of character education and citizenship education is better spent fighting the enemies of all kinds of moral education than in internal disputes without proper historical, conceptual, or theoretical grounding (Lu, 2024).

Neo-Aristotelian character education fundamentally posits that imitating moral role models like teachers can develop virtue. However, despite the pedagogical appeal of role modelling, what imitation involves is methodologically unclear (Henderson, 2024). Character education faces various challenges. The challenges that arise include limited facilities, support, parental motivation, and students' ability to follow learning. Therefore, character education requires additional strategies (Iksal, 2024).

Character education in Indonesia is now increasingly challenging because young people are involved in all kinds of criminal and illegal acts, including free sex, drugs, fighting, illegal racing, and gambling. Although character education is considered important to prepare the future generation, this system has not been able to solve the problems young people face in Indonesia (Muassomah et al., 2020).

Therefore, a more effective strategy is needed in character education. That system is compulsory military conscription. Is there a relationship between character and military service? The relationship is very significant. The number of military conscription veterans who commit crimes is minimal. Military conscription veterans are also less likely to resist police when arrested. This phenomenon is because culture and training during military conscription have a lasting effect on behaviour (Morgan et al., 2023). With compulsory military service, the country no longer needs to worry about the lack of human resources in the defence sector; they are more disciplined and efficient (Govaerts, 2020).

In the Swedish civilian labour market, the measure of individual ability is apparently only available to those who have done military service. That is why Sweden has reintroduced conscription, allowing a mix of conscription and volunteer service (Bäckström, 2022). Military conscription is considered adaptive and flexible, even superior to professional military forces in building national defence. There are five advantages: selective military service, early discharge, the term of service can be extended, the form of service is voluntary, and the salary and other benefits are also different from pure military (Ben-ari et al., 2023).

Implementing military conscription requires careful consideration due to the high number of suicides among participants. Suicide is not entirely due to their participation in military service but may be related to other cases, including legal ones. However, mental issues

in facing war situations may have a significant impact. Therefore, military conscription participants must have wider access to mental health (Landes et al., 2023). Compulsory military conscription has its weaknesses, namely that those who are deployed for humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) combat missions have low health diagnoses, and some even die from suicide (Cunha et al., 2018).

Military conscription in the Nordic countries is only for men. However, military conscription is not counted as an indicator for calculating the gender equality index. Gender-responsive military conscription budgets have recently been introduced in the Nordic countries. Military investment cannot be ignored in the government budget. However, when military conscription is gender-specific, the government is considered gender-discriminatory. Some people think that military conscription is a tax. Since military conscription is only for young men, it can be considered a gender-based tax (Heikkilä & Laukkanen, 2022).

However, Sweden, which had considered military conscription outdated, eventually viewed it as modern, reasonable, and justifiable. Thus, military conscription was reimagined and implemented again. Sweden now considers military conscription important and reimplements it through three separation practices connecting voluntary military service, freedom, consent, individuality, individual opportunity, and gender neutrality. They separate military conscription from the attributes associated with its roots in the tradition of republican soldier citizens: obligation, collectivism, and male citizenship (Strand, 2024).

In the case of Korean Vietnam War veterans, studies conducted on pre-military conscription, during military conscription, and post-military conscription showed that Korean War veterans had higher life satisfaction, especially after marriage, and had higher monthly incomes compared to when they were poor as children. They viewed military service as something positive and had less stress after completing it (Lee et al., 2022).

Methodology

This research used a qualitative-descriptive approach with a discourse analysis method. The object of this research was military service, which is expected to strengthen national character education. The discourse analysis method was the most appropriate choice because military service has never been implemented in Indonesia. Discourse analysis is a research method that aims to understand how language is used in various social contexts to reveal hidden meanings, ideologies, or power involved in texts and conversations. This method focuses on the linguistic and social aspects of the text, examining how words and language structures reflect and shape social relationships and cultural norms.

Discourse analysis has several approaches based on its research objectives. (1) Critical discourse analysis aims to reveal power relationships, ideologies, and injustice in texts. This approach sees language as a tool that forms and maintains social structures; (2) pragmatic discourse analysis focuses on how context influences the interpretation of language, including aspects of implicature and hidden meaning in conversation; (3) narrative analysis examines how stories are used to convey specific meanings, both in individual communication and in media representation; and (4) cultural discourse analysis focuses on understanding how certain cultures and values are presented and conveyed through text.

This research chose critical discourse analysis as its approach. This research aimed to reveal the relationship between the power of Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto and military conscription, a panacea instrument in building national character. Subianto is the

president with a background as a general, so he is suspected of leading Indonesia in a militaristic manner. However, Subanto chose to commit to Law No. 23 of 2019 concerning Human Resource Management for National Defence, which does not enforce military service but imposes a reserve component. Although military service is not required in the applicable law, it is believed that it can answer various national problems concerning ideology and injustice in society and help build a just social structure.

The discourse analysis process was carried out by determining the text or discourse being analysed. In this case, the texts chosen were “character education” and “military conscription.” “Character education” was chosen because there is an allegation that the decline of the Indonesian nation is due to the quality of its character, which continues to decline. Meanwhile, “military conscription” was chosen because, in the practice of compulsory military conscription in various countries, compulsory military conscription can significantly improve character, such as building resilience of the younger generation, increasing discipline, building courage, building independence, building esprit de corps, and causing young people to be more tactical.

After selecting the text, the researcher then conducted macro- and micro-analysis. Macro analysis was conducted by looking at the general structure and themes in the text, in this case, the text about “character education” and “compulsory military service” and trying to understand it in a social and political context. Microanalysis was conducted by looking at specific linguistic elements, by selecting the words “character education” and “compulsory military service.” Then the researcher identified the themes and motifs that emerged in the discourse that led to the values or ideologies adopted by the Indonesian nation.

The researcher then evaluated the relationship between power and ideology by analysing who was speaking, who the text was intended for, and how the power structure influenced the discourse. In this case, the alleged speaker was Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, who addressed the newly appointed ministers at the Magelang Military Academy, Central Java, with the intention that they would be disciplined in carrying out their duties and be prepared to serve the nation and state.

The discourse analysis technique was carried out intertextually by understanding the relationship between the texts “character education” and “compulsory military conscription”, where compulsory military conscription greatly influences the quality of national character education. The researcher also attempted to analyse the social and historical contexts that influence the meaning of the discourse. The researcher also analysed how the social and historical contexts influence the meaning of the discourse. Thus, the researcher then identified elements that show how the power of the Indonesian president is manifested in language in the form of the texts “character education” and “compulsory military conscription” to achieve state goals.

Findings

Character education plays a vital role for the Indonesian nation, especially in forming a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent but also has a strong personality and morals. This strong character is the core of the defence of the Indonesian nation. Table 1 below shows some pressing reasons why Indonesian education is so important.

Table 1. *Urgency of character education for the Indonesian nation*

Urgency	Explanation
Building a generation with integrity and morals	Character education instills ethical, moral, and integrity values in a younger generation. This character education is expected to solve challenges, such as corruption, intolerance, and declining moral values in society and among national leaders. A young generation with integrity is an asset to the nation's progress.
Responding to the challenges of globalization	In this era of globalisation, foreign cultures often erode local cultural values. Character education is believed to help instill national values, such as cooperation, tolerance, and love of the homeland, which can be the basis for dealing with the negative impacts of globalisation. Strong character helps the young generation of Indonesia maintain national identity while remaining open to global developments.
Preventing juvenile delinquency and social deviance	Character education also serves as a preventative measure against various social problems that often occur in the younger generation, such as juvenile delinquency, drug and narcotic abuse, and other deviant behaviour. By instilling the values of discipline, responsibility, and honesty, character education helps the younger generation to avoid negative things and focus more on self-development.
Improving the quality of national education	Character education is not only related to morals but also supports academic quality. The attitude of discipline, never giving up, and perseverance instilled through character education contributes to student success. When students have a good work ethic, it will positively impact their learning outcomes and improve the quality of education in Indonesia as a whole.
Strengthening social cohesion and intercultural tolerance	Indonesia is known as a country with diverse ethnicities, religions, and cultures. Character education is important in fostering mutual respect and appreciation for differences, which is essential in maintaining national unity. With strong tolerance, character education can reduce the potential for conflict between individuals and groups.
Preparing a competitive and highly competitive generation	Character traits like teamwork, adaptability, and good work ethics are highly desirable in the modern workplace. Character education helps shape individuals who are intelligent and have effective interpersonal and ethical skills, making them more competitive in the international arena. This is important for developing high-quality Indonesian human resources who are prepared to compete globally.
Instilling national values and nationalism	Character education plays a crucial role in instilling national values amidst the challenges of the digital era, which often introduces various foreign cultures. The younger generation is taught to love and appreciate their own nation, understand Indonesian history and culture, and commit to contributing to the nation's progress.

There is a close relationship between character education and military service. The relationship between character education and military service can be seen in how both contribute to the formation of disciplined, responsible individuals who love the nation and state. Many countries implement military service as part of a strategy to form the character of the younger generation, aiming for the experience of undergoing military service to produce a generation with a strong

character, a tough mentality, and a high sense of nationalism. Table 2 below shows the relationship between character education and military service.

The relationship between military conscription and character education is very close, because both focus on forming disciplined, responsible individuals who can work together and lead. By participating in military conscription, individuals receive character education directly applied in everyday life in the military environment. Thus, military service can be an effective way to form a generation that is not only intelligent and skilled but also has a strong personality, loves the homeland, and is ready to face global challenges.

Table 2. *Similarities in character building between character education and military conscription*

Forming discipline and responsibility	Military service requires everyone to follow strict military rules and regulations regarding time, appearance, and behaviour. This requirement is in line with character education, which also instills the value of discipline as a foundation for achieving life goals and making personal progress. By participating in military conscription, a person learns about discipline and responsibility, not only to themselves but also to their group or team.
Strengthening the spirit of nationalism and patriotism	One of the main goals of character education is to form individuals who love and respect their country. Military conscription directly fosters the spirit of nationalism and patriotism because participants must understand their role in the country's defence. In military education, they are introduced to the history of the nation, state symbols, and values of struggle that further strengthen love for the homeland. This effort is in accordance with the goal of character education, which emphasises the importance of nationalism.
Training mental and physical resilience	Military conscription requires participants to undergo intensive physical and mental training to strengthen their resilience in difficult situations. In character education, mental resilience is an important part that encourages someone never to give up and continue to move forward in facing various life challenges. By participating in military service, participants have demonstrated mental resilience, which aligns with the goal of character education in producing individuals who are emotionally and mentally strong.
Building a corporate spirit	In military conscription, participants are trained to work together in a team, understand the importance of each role, and respect each other. They are trained to be leaders responsible for their team members, especially in situations requiring quick decision-making. This aspect aligns with character education that teaches about leadership, cooperation, and empathy for others. With these skills, individuals are expected to be able to play a positive role in society.
Building self-confidence and independence	Military conscription training often requires participants to control themselves in certain situations, especially when facing physical and mental challenges. Situations like this provide an opportunity for individuals to develop self-confidence and independence. In the context of character education, self-confidence and independence are important qualities needed to become a resilient and adaptive person.
Cultivating self-discipline and work ethics.	In the military, conscripts face an environment that values self-discipline and high work ethics. Strict procedures regulate all military actions, instilling the importance of following the rules and respecting

	others. Character education also instills the same values to ensure that individuals have ethics in working, behaving, and respecting others' rights.
Developing a sense of responsibility for society and nation.	During military conscription, participants learn they are responsible to the country and society. In character education, social responsibility is one of the main aspects of teaching individuals to care about themselves, others, and their surroundings. Through military service, a person learns how to be a responsible citizen and knows the importance of contributing to the common good.
Forming work ethic and resilience in facing pressure.	In military education, participants are often placed in stressful situations. This method aims to hone participants' ability to cope with stress and remain calm in difficult situations. In character education, resilience in facing pressure is an important value taught to ensure that someone does not give up when facing difficulties. The military service experience can be real training in developing self-resilience.

Although character education has many benefits in building the nation's character, military service also has several weaknesses, especially in its implementation in various countries. Some weaknesses that often occur are:

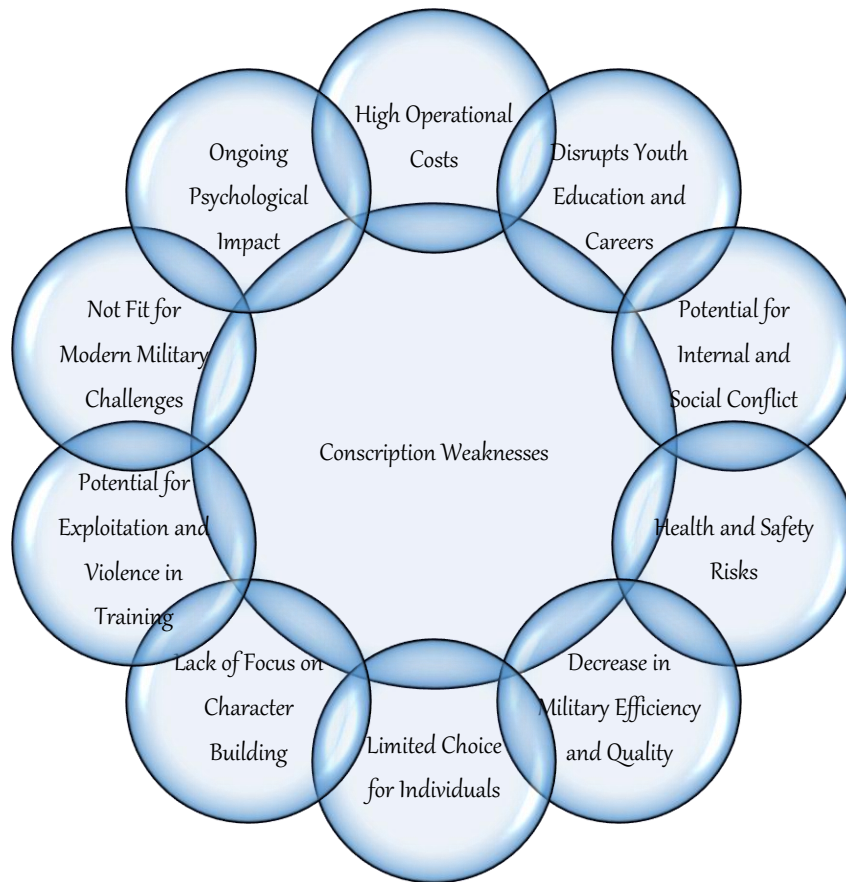
- **High Operational Costs.** Implementing a mandatory military service program requires a large budget for training, equipment, logistics, and the welfare of participants. In some countries, these costs can burden the state budget, especially if the number of young people required to undergo military service is enormous. These high costs are often debated because the funds could be used for other sectors such as education, health, or infrastructure.
- **Disrupts Youth Education and Careers.** One of the biggest criticisms of mandatory military service is that this program disrupts young people's education or career paths. Compulsory military service is usually implemented at a productive age, when many young people are pursuing higher education or starting a career. Compulsory military service often causes delays in achieving education and careers, because individuals must spend time on military training, which can sometimes be quite long.
- **Potential for Internal and Social Conflict.** Implementing compulsory military service sometimes causes dissatisfaction among the community, especially if its implementation rules are considered unfair. For example, there are exceptions for certain groups, and nepotism or injustice in recruitment can trigger social tensions. In addition, young men who do not want to serve in the military for personal or ideological reasons may feel forced, leading to internal conflicts and damaging social harmony.
- **Health and Safety Risks.** Military training requires participants to face harsh physical and mental conditions, such as extreme physical training, combat simulations, and training in rugged terrain. These conditions can pose a risk of injury or even death. Some individuals may not be physically or mentally prepared for this, which can negatively impact their long-term health.
- **A decrease in military efficiency and quality.** In the professional armed forces, military personnel usually undergo specialized training that focuses on a particular field for an extended period. However, in conscription, individuals only undergo basic training for a short time, making them less competent in military duties. As a result, personnel recruited

through conscription may not have sufficient skills and experience to manage complex combat situations or military operations.

- **Limited Choice for Individuals.** Military conscription reduces the freedom of individuals to choose whether or not they want to pursue a career in the military. Some people may feel unsuited to military life and feel forced into training or work they are not interested in. This can have a mental and emotional impact on them, creating feelings of dissatisfaction that ultimately affect their morale and enthusiasm for military conscription.
- **Lack of Focus on Character Building.** Although one of the goals of compulsory military conscription is to build character among young people, implementing this program is not always effective. In some cases, compulsory military training that emphasizes strict discipline can cause resistance or discomfort in participants, so the goal of positive character building is not achieved. In addition, without a supporting follow-up program, character changes obtained during compulsory military conscription may only be temporary.
- **Potential for Exploitation and Violence in Training.** Military conscription is also vulnerable to various forms of abuse, such as exploitation of labor, hazing as occurs in several service schools, or even violence by colleagues or superiors in training programs. Some cases of excessive hazing and harassment in the military environment can have a negative impact on the mental well-being of participants. These experiences not only damage the spirit of participants but can also leave lasting trauma.
- **Not Fit for Modern Military Challenges.** In the increasingly complex world of the modern military, technical skills and specializations, such as information technology, intelligence, and complex military operations, are becoming more important. A conscription system that only provides basic training may not be adequate to meet the demands of the high skills needed. As a result, conscription becomes less relevant in producing a military force ready to face modern warfare.
- **Ongoing Psychological Impact.** Not all individuals are prepared for the intense physical and mental stress of military training. In some cases, this stress can lead to mental health issues such as stress, trauma, or even other psychological disorders. Furthermore, if individuals are forced to undergo this experience without adequate preparation or will, the resulting psychological impact can be very detrimental to their future well-being.

It can be said that, although compulsory military service has benefits in shaping character and increasing the readiness of national defense, many challenges and disadvantages must be considered, as seen in Figure 1. Compulsory military conscription can disrupt education and careers, has the potential to cause social conflict, and poses health and safety risks for individuals who are not prepared. Therefore, implementing compulsory military service should be designed wisely by considering alternatives, such as voluntary training programs or an emphasis on character education in schools.

Figure 1. *Conscription weaknesses in building character*



Discussion

A longitudinal study of health in China among older men aged 60 and above showed that conscription was positively associated with better health for the elderly regarding physical health, cognitive ability, and self-rated health. In addition, compared with those who had never served in the military, conscription veterans had healthier habits, better education, higher individual and household income, and better social health insurance (Zhao et al., 2024). An Estonian study on the relationship between military service experience and attitudes after military service showed that there was indeed a reduction in quality of life compared to those who did not serve in the military. At least during military service, they were worried about what was happening at home. In fact, they often expressed negative emotions and were critical. At best, conscripts should take a proactive view of training and determine the specific aspects of the military that are personally important to them and associated with positive attitudes (Parmak & Tyfa, 2023).

Military service investigated based on the perspective of social construction shows that those who enter reserve military service out of self-awareness are significant for implementing military service. This social construction includes:(1) Complementary life. Reserve military service provides material benefits and satisfaction with ideological commitment, which cannot

be obtained in other ways. (2) Fair living arrangements, where, at times, compensation is needed, which is understood as self-sacrifice. (3) Identity that is not in harmony. This is indeed one of the weaknesses of military service, which openly or secretly conflicts with established civilian identity and life. (4) And self-definition. Some people understand reserve military service as self-identity (Griffith & Ben-Ari, 2021).

Military service in Indonesia has undergone a paradigm shift. The Compulsory Military Service Law stipulates military service for all citizens, regardless of age, from 18 to 40. This paradigm shift has been driven by the enactment of the Reserve Component Bill, mandated by Article 8 of the National Defence Law. The Reserve Component (Komcad) does not use the term "conscription," but rather "basic military training." Basic military training is only applicable to reserve components, including civil servants, workers, or laborers; former TNI soldiers who meet the requirements and are recalled to Komcad; and volunteers who meet the requirements to join the Reserve Component.

The mandatory military service agenda in the Draft State Reserve Components Bill has sparked controversy. The lack of provisions protecting citizens who refuse military service due to conscientious objection can lead to criminalization and human rights violations if military service is implemented, as has been the case in other countries. Guaranteeing the protection of conscientious objection as part of civil and political rights is necessary if the government intends to implement compulsory military service. Furthermore, Indonesia has acknowledged the existence of conscientious objection in the history of military service (Simamora, 2014).

However, due to Indonesia's strategic geographic location, the Reserve Component Law states that compulsory military service contributes to the nation's defense by involving citizens as reserve members. Compulsory military service fosters patriotism and nationalism in society. Most importantly, compulsory military service can foster discipline in the community. However, the Reserve Component Bill has undeniably drawn criticism. The first criticism concerns the potential violation of human rights, particularly civil rights, as everyone has the right to refuse military service. Meanwhile, the Reserve Component Bill emphasizes that those who refuse compulsory military service will be subject to criminal sanctions. The second criticism is that compulsory military service requires significant funding. The TNI's budget requirement is a minimum of IDR 100 trillion, and the government has only been able to meet IDR 33 trillion. Compulsory military service adds to the state's financial burden at a time when other expenses are already increasing (Cohen, 2019).

Implementing compulsory military service in various countries worldwide has produced individuals who, while not particularly skilled in warfare, at least understand how to defend their beloved country. This compulsory military education offers numerous benefits in shaping and transforming the younger generation into better individuals (Noor, 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Military service is positively correlated with the health of older adults, notably regarding physical health, cognitive abilities, and self-rated health. Those who have never served in the military experience a decreased quality of life compared to those who have. Conscripts take a proactive approach to training and identify specific aspects that are personally important to them. Even those who enlist out of self-awareness find military service meaningful. In character education, compulsory military service is very effective in building discipline, hard work, esprit de corps, nationalism, and patriotism.

Despite the numerous benefits of military service for the state and society, its implementation has been controversial. Therefore, the draft law does not directly refer to it as the "Conscription Law," but rather as the "Reserve Components Bill." One criticism is that the absence of provisions protecting citizens who refuse military service due to conscientious objection could potentially lead to criminalization and human rights violations if conscription were implemented.

Disclosure statement

In this case, the author focuses more on the educational aspect, particularly character education for the younger generation, given that the quality of Indonesia's human resources is less compatible with modern life. Compulsory military service poses complex problems, but despite its many difficulties, its benefits are also significant, including building national character.

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