

Women in Indian Armed Forces: Personal and Organisational Prospects and Challenges

Air Marshal Anil Khosla (Retd)

Abstract

Traditionally, Indian defense services have been male-dominated however, the inclusion of women in defence services was inevitable with changes in societal norms and perceptions as well as in warfare and technology. The paper is an overview of the story of the expansion of the roles and career progression of women in the armed forces from a minor presence in support services to greater accommodation and participation in combat and command roles. Emphasising the specificity of the country's conservative culture and patriarchal social norms, the Paper analyses the challenges of gender prejudices. It highlights the evolution of the Armed Services, and the judicial interventions making for a gender-neutral force, but remains uncertain about the suitability and operational effectiveness of women in command and combat roles. It draws upon personal observations and long service experiences of the author, a retired senior Air Force officer.

Author Profile

Air Marshal Anil Khosla, PVSMM, AVSM, VM retired as the Vice Chief of the Air Staff in 2019. A fighter pilot, he commanded a Jaguar squadron and two operational Bases. He has held important appointments at senior ranks and worked extensively with the Army, Navy, and Government Ministries and agencies (including National Technical Research Organisation, Defense Research and Development Organisation, Indian Space Research Organisation, National Disaster Management Authority and defence Public Sector Units). He was actively involved in formulating Air Force War Plans, Force structure planning and capability building. He handled Doklam and Balakot air operations and planned, monitored, and executed several internal and international Exercises and in Disaster Relief situations within India and abroad. He holds two MPhil degrees in Defence and Strategic Studies. With good reason, he prides himself on wielding his pen with equal adroitness as in wielding the joystick. After retirement, he became an ardent blogger and popular commentator on strategic affairs. His academic work includes written papers (on air power, geopolitics, security issues, leadership and management), conduct of strategic exercises, book reviews, mentoring and motivational talks.

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*“Not all women wear pearls and shoes to work,
some wear dog tags and combat boots”.*

Anonymous

Introduction

Women's participation in the armed forces has evolved significantly over the years worldwide, with a growing recognition of their valuable contribution to the defense and security of the country. Many countries now allow women to serve in the armed forces in multiple roles. The extent of participation and roles vary from country to country, depending on cultural norms, legal frameworks, and military policies.

Traditionally, Indian armed forces have been male-dominated, however, the inclusion of women was inevitable with changes in societal norms and perceptions. The roles and opportunities for women have expanded over the years with associated changes in military policies.

The history of women in the Indian defense services is a story of gradual progress and increasing participation, from support services and roles to combat and command roles. Utilization pattern in the forces -- Army, Navy, Air Force, Paramilitary, Coast Guard, and other central armed forces varies depending upon their particularities and roles. This article deals with aspects related to the participation and role of women in the three-armed forces, that is, Indian Army, the Navy, and the Air Force. Organizationally, the Indian Air Force (AF) has been more progressive than the other services in gender mainstreaming.

While the inclusion of women in the armed forces brings several benefits, certain challenges and barriers still exist. Over the last three decades since women's induction into the forces, several of the social and cultural issues holding back gender integration were faced, these were a natural reaction to any change. Moreover, such challenges are not unique to the Indian armed forces and they remain issues of concern in foreign militaries even after decades of gender inclusion. Periodically, aspects related to cultural and societal inhibitors, career opportunities and progression, physical and psychological suitability for combat and leadership roles, physical and mental fitness norms, need to be reviewed for mid-course correction. Persisting challenges inhibiting gender integration such as gender bias and discrimination as well as mechanisms for preventing harassment and redress need to be systematically addressed.

The paper is divided broadly into three parts. The first one brings in the historical perspective on the topic globally and maps developments and advancements made in gender inclusion in India. The second section engages in analyzing the challenges while the final part suggests a way ahead.

Most of the views expressed in the Paper are derived from the personal observations and experiences of the author, a retired Air Force officer, with long years of serving the institution. These are supplemented by conversations on the subject with serving and veteran personnel, both male and female. Secondary literature on the subject also has been consulted.

Women in the Armed Forces: Global Trends

Historically, women were excluded from combat roles in the defense forces. They were involved primarily in support roles, such as nursing, administrative work, and other non-combat positions. Women's roles were often undervalued and underestimated in these contexts. World War I and II marked a turning point for women's involvement in the defense services. The demand for manpower led to the expansion of women's roles beyond traditional boundaries. Women took up roles as mechanics, drivers, communications operators, and more, both in combat zones and at home. Over time, many countries began to officially integrate women into their defense forces. This integration initially focused on non-combat roles but gradually expanded to include combat positions as well. The 21st century has witnessed a shift in attitudes toward women's roles in defense services. Many nations have recognized the value of diversity and the skills that women can bring to various military roles. Consequently, efforts have been made to remove barriers to entry and promotion for women within the military.

“My personal experience has been that the (principles) of leadership and team building apply equally to women as to men. As long as you protect qualification standards and give no impression that anyone is getting a free ride, integration, while not without bumps, will be much less dramatic than people envision.”

– Major Eleanor Taylor, Canadian Military (Sisters in Arms n.d)

The first woman to lead an infantry company in combat.

Women's participation in defense services worldwide has evolved significantly over the years, and several countries have made considerable strides in integrating women into their defense forces. Non-conscription countries where there is voluntary enlistment, particularly in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, have the highest levels of female military presence. Countries like Israel, Australia, and several European and Nordic nations also have attained a high level of gender integration. The United States, in particular, has played a pioneering role when it comes to the question of inducting women into the armed forces. Israel is known for the high representation

of women in the armed forces. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is among the only military in the world that conscript women into its ranks under a mandatory military draft law. Countries like Eritrea and Israel have the largest share (about 33 per cent) of women in the armed forces. RAF has the highest proportion of women in the UK Regular Forces. The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) was one of the first to allow women to serve in all roles. Canada is a world leader in both the proportion of women in its military and the areas in which they can serve.

Women in the Indian Defence Services

Historical Evolution

The inclusion of women in the Indian Armed Forces started during British rule in the year 1888 with the formation of the Indian Military Nursing Service (MNS). Following India's independence, military nurses were granted regular commission as per the Army Act, of 1950 and in 1954, the all-women's MNS corps was brought under Army Rules along with Army Medical Corps and Army Dental Corps and constituted the Armed Forces Medical Services (AFMS). A reverse gender bias operates in the MNS. According to the Military Nursing Service Rules (1943, 1944) only women are allowed to join the service. This has been challenged by the Indian Professional Nurses Association (IPNA) and a writ petition is pending in the Delhi High Court, seeking the recruitment of male nurses in the Military MNS.

The role of women in the armed forces was limited for a long time to the medical stream, that is, as doctors and nurses. In 1992, the Army, Air Force, and Navy began inducting women as Short Service Commission (SSC) officers under the Women Special Entry Scheme. It saw women's entry as regular officers in aviation, logistics, law, engineering, and executive cadres. Initially, women officers could serve for five years, and their service could be extended by another five years. In 2006, the policy was modified to allow women to serve for a maximum of 14 years as SSC officers. In 2008, Permanent Commission (PC) was granted to women in the departments of Judge Advocate General and Army Education Corps. Since then, women have been inducted into various arms and branches of the armed forces.¹

Women were not allowed to serve in front-line combat roles. In 2015, the Air Force forged the way, opening up a combat role for women as fighter pilots. It happened as an evolutionary process as women officers were already flying transport aircraft and helicopters since 1994. Already some of the foreign Air Forces had inducted women into the fighter stream. On Air Force Day 8 October 2015, the Air Chief Air Marshal Anup Raha announced the induction of women into the fighter stream.

¹ Dimple Sangeetha, Gender Equality in the Indian Armed Forces, 4 August 2020.
<https://legallydiviner.blogspot.com/2020/08/gender-equality-in-indian-armed-forces.html>

The Navy followed with women as pilots and observers on its maritime reconnaissance aircraft, which is a combat role. In 2019, Permanent Commission was extended to women in eight departments in the Indian Army – Signals, Engineers, Army Aviation, Army Air Defence, Electronics and Mechanical Engineers, Army Service Corps, Army Ordnance Corps, and Intelligence.

Indian security is looked after by the armed forces consisting of the Army, Navy, and Air Force and supported by the Indian Coast Guard and the paramilitary forces. Women have been part of all these forces and made significant strides in career advancement. According to the junior Minister of Defence speaking in the Lok Sabha, the number of women personnel serving in three services is 11,414 (PIB. March 2023). This total number includes officers, and other ranks as well as those in medical, dental, and nursing services. The number of women officer cadre employed in the three services excluding those in medical, dental, and nursing services comes to 4,948. The Army has the maximum number of service women.

Reports in the public domain suggest that in terms of percentages, women's strength in the Army is approximately 3.8 percent compared to 13 percent of the Air Force and percent of the Navy. In recent times, the Indian government has taken significant steps on their own initiative as well as at the intervention of the courts, to increase the percentage ratio of women (officers and other ranks) and advance their career progression. Recently, the Indian Armed Forces is seeing a surge in the participation of women. Women have started enlisting in the military under the Agneepath program in the military police, and as sailors and airmen. The policies and rules regarding their career progression, employment, and promotional aspects are becoming gender-neutral to provide them with equal opportunities. A gender-neutral Career Progression policy covering employment and promotional aspects was promulgated on November 23, 2021 to provide equal opportunities to women officers in the Arms/Services where they are commissioned.

Meanwhile, all branches of the Indian Armed Forces now have women in combat roles except in some core combat roles of the Indian Army such as Infantry, Mechanized Infantry and Armoured Corps. Women are allowed command appointments on par with men. To ensure greater inclusiveness, gender parity, and equal participation of women in the forces, women are being allowed into *Sainik* schools and defense academies. These institutions are mandated to prepare future armed services' officers. Sainik schools were all boys' schools till 2018 when they began admitting girls as well. The prestigious National Defence Academy (NDA) opened its door to girl cadets in July 2022.

Indian Air Force

The Air Force has been at the forefront of gender integration, with women being inducted into the force from 1992-93. The Air Force started the induction of women as transport and helicopter pilots in 1994. The women officers proved their mettle and performed well in these roles including

missions related to disaster management. They were found to be at par in performance with their male counterparts. According to retired Air Chief Marshal N.C. Suri, at the time of the first induction of women officers in 1992, there were thousands of applicants for 12 vacancies in the administrative branch. Being the first batch, the selected candidates were exceptional and performed exceedingly well, the former Air Chief said (personal communication with author, Bangalore).

Three decades later, in the Air Force, women served in various roles, including flying fighter jets, transport aircraft, and helicopters, as well as holding important positions in ground duty branches like administration, logistics, air traffic control, navigation, engineering, meteorology, accounts, judge advocate general, and logistics. The Air Force employs the largest percentage of women officers among the three armed forces.

According to Ministry of Defence figures, the strength of women officers, as of July 2023, in the Air Force (excluding Medical and Dental branches) is 1,654. The Air Force follows a gender-neutral approach in the employment of women. They are considered at par with their male counterparts with no differentiation in type and quantum of training and work depending upon the type of commission, SSC or PC. The rules provide equal opportunities, even empowering women to hold key appointments including that of Commanding Officers in Combat Units of various field units. For the first time ever in the Indian Air Force's history, a woman officer has taken over command of a frontline combat unit (missile squadron) shattering the proverbial glass ceiling. In March 2023, Group Captain Shaliza Dhami took over command of a frontline combat unit in the western sector.

Modern air combat in the digital age involves the management of aircraft systems and weapons. In present-day air combat with beyond-visual-range missiles, one may not even see the enemy in the air. Fighter flying needs a high level of physical and mental fitness. These requirements are gender-neutral in nature. In 2016, the first batch of women officers was commissioned in the fighter stream. These women pilots now fly MiG-21s, Sukhoi-30s, MiG-29, and the latest Rafale jets. The experimental scheme to induct women officers in all combat roles, initiated by the Air Force in 2015 has now been regularized into a permanent scheme. The Air Force continues to remain a favorite for women among the three services, because it offers them a thrilling environment, flying opportunities, and the opportunity to be part of combat operations.

Indian Army

Women have been serving for more than 100 years in the nursing and medical branch of the Army. In 1992, women were inducted under the Women's Special Entry scheme of SSC for 5 years, in the Army Service Corps, Army Ordnance Corps, Army Education Corps, and Judge Advocate General Department. Later, the entry of women was opened up into the Electrical and Mechanical Engineering Corps as well as the Intelligence Corps. In 1996, the SSC of 5 years was extended to 10 years, and in 2004, it was increased to 14 years. Till the year 2018, women were recruited only as officers in the Indian Army. In the year 2019, women were inducted into the military police. In

July 2020, women were granted PC in 10 streams, these include: Army Air Defence (AAD), Signals, Engineers, Army Aviation, Electronics and Mechanical Engineers (EME), Army Service Corps (ASC), Army Ordnance Corps (AOC), and Intelligence Corps, in addition to the existing streams of Judge and Advocate General (JAG) and Army Educational Corps (AEC). Remount and Veterinary Corps (RVC) was added in 2023.

Following the grant of PC, and the putting in place of a gender-neutral Career Progression policy the Indian Army opened up avenues for Women Officers to serve as pilots in the Army Aviation Corps. Women officers are being considered for Colonel (Select Grade) ranks and are being given command appointments. They are being inducted in other ranks in the Corps of Military Police under the Agneepath Scheme.

Indian Navy

The induction of women as officers in the Indian Navy commenced in 1992 as short-service commissioned officers in a few branches. Since then, the Indian Navy has gradually opened up all branches to women officers. By 2019 they were being inducted into 11 branches - including observation, legal, logistics, education and flying. At present women comprise six percent of the workforce in the Navy. PC is being granted to those eligible. Women are also being recruited as sailors for the first time under the Agneepath Scheme. Twenty percent of sailor positions have been reserved for them. Women officers are deployed on board warships, as Naval Air Operations (NAO) Officers on Helicopters, in Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) stream, on Diplomatic and other Overseas Assignments.

Women in the Paramilitary

In addition to the three main branches of the armed forces, women have been inducted into the paramilitaries: Indian Coast Guard, Assam Rifles and the Central Armed Police Forces.

Indian Coast Guard

Women can join the Indian Coast Guard in officer ranks as general duty, pilot, or law officers. In January 2017, the Indian Coast Guard deployed four women officers of assistant commandant rank on board a hovercraft ship patrolling the Indian maritime zone. Following the Supreme Court's directive of February 2024, the Indian Coast Guard is to ensure the grant of Permanent Commission to eligible women officers.

Assam Rifles

In April 2016, Assam Rifles inducted the first batch of 100 female soldiers. They are being deployed for Cordon and Search Operations (CASO), Mobile Check Posts (MCP), and road opening operations in various battalions. Increasingly women soldiers are needed for performing tasks such as searching, frisking, and interrogation of women, crowd control, and dispersal of female protesters. In August 2020, an estimated 30 rifle-women from Assam Rifles were deployed

along the LoC for the first time.

Central Armed Police Forces

The Central Armed Police Forces consist of five forces, namely the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Border Security Force (BSF), Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) and Central Industrial Security Force (CISF). Women from the Indian Police Service have been seconded to these forces, and some of them have led these forces as Director Generals. In March 2016, direct entry of women as officers and constables was allowed into these forces. In March 2016, Home Minister Rajnath Singh announced that women would be inducted into constable-rank up to 33 percent of the force in CRPF and CISF and up to 15 percent in the border guarding forces of BSF, SSB, and ITBP. The CRPF has six Mahila Battalions. The first Mahila Battalion in CRPF, the 88(M) Bn was raised in 1986 and is headquartered at Delhi.

Other Forces

Women also serve in the National Security Guard (NSG), Special Protection Group (SPG), Railway Protection Force (RPF), National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and Border Roads Organisation (BRO). The National Security Guard (NSG) Black Cat Commandos first inducted female commandos in 2011–12. In 2015, the government announced that female NSG Black Cat Commandos who undergo the same training as their male counterparts will be deployed in counter-terrorism operations as they are required to perform VIP protection duties. The Special Protection Group (SPG) inducted female commandos in 2013. The Railway Protection Force (RPF) has a female unit, *Shakti Squad*. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) got its first woman commander in 2015. In June 2021, BRO appointed the first woman officer to command a BRO Company as a part of the India-China Border Roads.²

Inhibitors and Accelerators to Gender Inclusion

“Valour knows no gender.” - Barack Obama

Benefits of Inclusion

Including women in the armed forces has several military and societal benefits. The inclusion of women broadens the pool of selection. It not only improves the quality of intake but also offsets falling recruitment and retention rates. Overall, a mixed-gender force makes the military strong. The entry of women in the armed forces has a positive impact on society as a whole. Experience shows that gender integration generates greater respect for women and their abilities. It helps in breaking down gender stereotypes and promotes gender equality. Women who are serving or have served in the services have often said that they developed a high degree of self-confidence. As a

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki?curid=56152970>

former female colleague told the author, “We became more self-reliant and better equipped to cope with or face difficult situations in life”.

Performance

The ultimate test for women’s inclusion is performance in defense services. Is it at par with their male counterparts? Women have demonstrated their capabilities and dedication in various roles, including combat situations. Studies of the experiences of countries that have integrated women into combat roles suggest that their performance is generally consistent with the standards set for those roles. Many women have achieved high ranks and distinctions within defense services, proving their competence and dedication. In the services, one comes across many women officers with a record of exceptional performance in their jobs and with the utmost dedication, even at the cost of their personal life. However, there are others who have shown lower motivation levels and other priorities in life.

Another observation often made by veteran officers is that the performance level of the early batch of women inductees generally was higher as they were motivated to prove the point that women are equally good, if not better than their male counterparts. Over the years the pattern of performance level has become similar to that of their male counterparts.

Cultural and Societal Factors

Cultural and societal norms play a significant role in determining the extent to which women are integrated into the armed services. In some countries, including India, women are socially cast within more traditional gender roles and do face resistance to participation. In Indian society generally, the protection of women from external aggressors is considered the paramount role of men. Prospects of women falling prey to an enemy and becoming a prisoner of war or a hostage, and the threat of physical abuse and torture create anxiety about inducting women in combat units involved in direct contact combat with the enemy. While both male and female prisoners are at risk of torture and rape, there tends to be a lower acceptance in societies to the abuse of women prisoners of war by the enemy. However, it is important to keep in mind, as a serving woman officer told the author, the issue is about the right of women to choose, that is, to opt for serving in a combat role.

Speaking at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit 2023, were three of the armed forces’ stellar women officers who had challenged the glass ceiling and were the first to be appointed to command postings (HT/youtube.com 2023). They were outspoken on the question of gender vulnerability in the context of being captured. For Group Captain, Shaliza Dhami, how we as defense officers handle such a situation “will depend upon our training, irrespective of a gender mindset.” Col. Neha was equally emphatic, when a soldier is taken as a POW, although there are laws of war of the Geneva Convention, history shows the possibility of facing torture. “If it comes to that, so be it. If I have to sacrifice my life. I ‘m ready for it,” she said.

Role Models and Leadership

Women have been taking on leadership roles within the defense services, including positions at senior levels and even as heads of defense ministries in some countries. The presence of women in leadership positions within the defense forces serves as a source of inspiration for women aspiring for careers in the military and helps reinforce the idea that gender should not limit one's career option. It is too early to assess the impact of women in command appointments in some arms and services. Moreover, there are persisting doubts about suitability and operational effectiveness. As one senior veteran officer observed to the author, "In my opinion they (women officers) will get equal respect so long as they command respect and not demand respect. The same is true for male counterparts."

In the Indian armed forces, women officers gradually are being allowed in combat services and supervisory roles. By 2020, three officers had reached three-star rank in the Medical Services. Air Force has already appointed a woman officer as the commanding officer of a frontline combat unit. The Indian Army after granting women Permanent Commission has cleared about 108 women officers for promotion to the Colonel (select) rank and for the first time in 'combat-support arms' as well as services like the Corps of Engineers, Signals, Ordnance, EME, and other such branches. Some of them, if found suitable and selected, will hold command appointments in the future.

The exceptional situation of these first few women officers makes them a magnet for the media. For instance, the first women fighter pilots drew intense media glare and ran the risk of getting distracted from their focus on flying training. This could have added to their stress were it not for the efforts made to shield them from exposure.

Legal Interventions

Like in many countries in the world, even in India, women in the defense services have had to knock on judicial doors to redress grievances related to gender equality and opportunities. In 2010, the Delhi High Court in a major ruling, granted PC to women serving as SSC officers in the Army and Air Force. The Air Force implemented the decision, but the Indian Army appealed against the judgment and approached the Supreme Court. Upholding the 2010 Delhi High Court judgment, the Supreme Court on February 17, 2020, said that women SSC officers are eligible to get PC in the Army, which up until then was granted to male officers only. In a complementary judgment on March 17, 2020, the Supreme Court said that women SSC officers of the Navy can be granted PC just like their male counterparts in the Indian Navy. In its judgment, the Supreme Court criticized societal stereotypes that discriminate against women on the basis of sex and gender (Sangeetha 2020)

“Arguments founded on the physical strengths and weaknesses of men and women and on assumptions about women in the social context of marriage and family do not constitute a constitutionally valid basis for denying equal opportunity to women officers.”

-MoD vs Babita Puniya &Ors, Supreme Court of India 2020

The Court said that we cannot assume that only women have domestic responsibilities toward parenting, children, and family. PC cannot be denied because of flawed reasons based on the physiological differences between men and women, which portray women as the weaker sex. Stressing the need to change social mind-sets, the Court held that differentiating women’s abilities based on gender is against the fundamental constitutional right of equality and dignity.

Apart from granting eligibility for PC, the Court also addressed the issue of women seeking command positions in the army. The Court said that an absolute restriction on women seeking command appointments is against the constitutional right to equality under Article 14. However, as several armed services veterans clarified, command assignments are not automatic for men SSC officers who are granted PC, and should not be automatic for women either. The criteria for deciding whether a particular candidate should be granted a command post, has been the needs of the service, performance, and organizational requirements. The issue is that women cannot be excluded from being considered for command appointments.

The judgment is explicit that all officers and soldiers have to go through the same selection criteria entailing a toughness schedule, promotion exams, command criteria assignments, and appointments with no concessions. The Supreme Court unequivocally stated that women officers who volunteer for combat action must comply with the standards stipulated and that the standards should in no way be lowered just to make room for women officers; or else this will compromise the “operational effectiveness” of the force (SCI Judgement 2020).

Policies and Regulation

Countries have varied policies and regulations regarding the participation of women in the defense services. Some countries, like the United States, have gradually expanded the roles women can serve in, including combat roles, while others have more restrictive policies. Articles 14, 15, 16 and 19 of the Indian constitution, uphold the values of equality and allow equal, non-discriminatory opportunities at work. The Indian government has been working on policy changes and reforms to address various challenges and concerns related to the deployment and accommodation of women in defense services. Over the years, there have been significant legal and policy changes aimed at promoting gender equality and enhancing the role of women in India's defense services. These changes have opened up more opportunities for women to serve in diverse capacities across various branches.

As mentioned above a gender-neutral Career Progression policy covering employment and promotional aspects was promulgated on 23 November 2021 to provide equal opportunities to

women officers in the Arms/Services where they are commissioned. But obstacles persisted in the implementation of an equal opportunities policy as evidenced by the regularity with which women officers felt compelled to appeal to the Supreme Court alleging discriminatory criteria of selection boards in relation to promotions. Two years after the policy was introduced, army headquarters informed the Supreme Court that an appropriate policy on career progression for women officers is being finalized in time for the Court directed March 2024 deadline (Livelaw News Network December 6, 2023).

While some of the early generations of women officers have talked of encountering gender prejudice and even a prevailing mind-set of gender stereotyping, there was a sense that this was largely so in the early decades. It was claimed that employment in the Indian Armed Forces, since then has evolved. Several serving officers, male and female, indicated to the author that there was no distinction in the deployment and working conditions of male and female soldiers in the arms and services in which they serve. The postings are as per organizational requirements and employment is as per qualifications and service qualitative requirements. However, the services do try and accommodate personal requirements subject to service needs, it was emphasized.

Relevant questions that arise during formulation of policies are whether 'combat' is gender-independent and whether women are as capable in physical, mental, and psychological domains as men in combat operations. Also, policy changes need to take into account the changing nature of warfare and the role of technology. Input from serving personnel, veterans with decades of experience, and foreign militaries of friendly countries would be valuable for policy formulation and review. Gender Integration needs to be an evolutionary process while maintaining a balance between personal and organizational aspirations, growth, requirements and concerns.

Women in Combat Role

Many countries allow women to serve in combat roles. The United States, Israel, North Korea, France, Germany, Netherlands, Australia, Norway and Canada are among the global militaries that deploy women in front-line combat positions. The United States took the decision to allow women to serve in combat roles in 2013. Some countries now allow women to serve in infantry, artillery, armored, and even Special Forces units. Globally the number of women in combat roles is low due to few volunteers and secondly, their inability to meet the selection criteria.

Combat role in the Indian Armed has for long been an exclusive domain of men. In recent years, India has started opening up combat and operational roles to women. In 2015, the Indian Air Force for the first time decided to induct women into the fighter wing. The Indian Navy followed suit with the first naval women being commissioned as pilots of Maritime Reconnaissance Aircraft in the year 2016. As of now, there are 18 women who are flying fighters like MiG-21s, MiG-29s, Sukhois, and the new Rafales in the AF, and there are also over 145 women helicopter and

transport aircraft pilots. The Indian Navy has deployed 30 women officers on frontline warships and plans to give them more opportunities to serve on warships. The Indian Army has enabled women to operate helicopters and in 2023, the first five women officers were commissioned into the artillery regiments. They are being trained to handle howitzers and rocket systems.

Special Forces

Special Forces - Para-SF of the Indian army, Marine Commandos of the Navy, and *Garud* Commando Force of the Air Force - are specially trained units, equipped with specialized weapons, deployed for clandestine warfare or special operations like counter-terrorism, anti-hijack, hostage rescue, intelligence-gathering, surgical strikes, and covert operations behind enemy lines. The Special Forces are voluntary and involve extremely arduous physical and mental training. Women officers in the armed forces are eligible to volunteer for induction into the Special Forces without any gender bias, provided they meet selection qualitative requirements (QRs) and successfully complete the training. A few women have volunteered to join the Special Forces, with some of them being selected to undergo training. So far none have succeeded in completing the training. It is just a matter of time before even this glass ceiling is broken.

Presumptions and Preconceptions: The Challenges

Women in the armed forces have made significant progress in many countries, but they still face several challenges due to the historically male-dominated nature of these institutions. In India too, the expansion of roles and increased recognition of women's contributions in the armed forces of India has paved the way for a more inclusive and diverse armed forces. Despite these advancements, women in armed forces face unique challenges, due to prevailing societal norms, and gender biases. Although the number of such situations are becoming less noticeable, a few women in the armed forces have complained of facing discriminatory experiences such as gender stereotyping, lack of acceptance from male colleagues or subordinates, unequal opportunities, harassment and marginalization.

Such incidents get wide publicity and tend to influence public opinion adversely. It's important to note that while these challenges exist to varying degrees, many countries including India are actively working to address them by implementing policies and initiatives that promote gender equality, diversity, and inclusion within the armed forces. Grievance redress systems have been put in place. In India, the preference has been to discourage publicity.

Difficult Early Years

Acceptance of women in the military has not been smooth in any country. Every country has struggled to mold the attitude of its society at large and male soldiers in particular, to enhance the acceptability of women in the military. At the beginning of women's induction, women officers that the author interacted with over the years, said they felt that their presence tended to make the environment 'formal and stiff'. They were not sure where to draw the line in their

behavior and interaction with their male counterparts. Now one sees a higher level of acceptance and ease in each other's presence.

Traditional gender biases and stereotypes can create a frustrating environment for women in the armed forces. Some seniors may have doubted their abilities and assigned them roles based on stereotypes rather than their skills and qualifications. In the early years, some of the women had communicated that they felt that their competence was not being given due recognition and despite their technical qualifications, they were being utilized for what was perceived as women-friendly jobs. Overall, a feeling prevailed that women were being marginalized and not being included in the decision-making process. This has changed to a very large extent, as observed by some of the serving women officers the author spoke to.

Harassment and Discrimination

Women in the armed forces, like in any other organization may face sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination, or bullying. All Defense services have instituted adequate checks and balances, procedures, and systems backed by legal provisions to curb these occurrences. The Indian armed forces follow a policy of zero tolerance for such acts and award severe punishment to the defaulters. Changes in social thought processes are taking place in society at large and even in the defense services about gender-neutral culpability in these matters. For instance, the perception that the male is always at fault is changing.

Lack of Support Services

Access to gender-specific support services and infrastructure is another challenge. While it is easy to address this issue in so-called peace locations, it is a challenge at forward bases with harsh conditions like Siachin, a forward line bunker or a submarine.

Physical Fitness Standards

Physical attributes have played a major role in denying women an active role in combat over the years. It is generally believed that physical fitness (strength and stamina) standards for certain roles, may disadvantage women due to physiological differences. Apprehensions are also voiced about the effect of pregnancy on physical fitness. Notwithstanding these legitimate suitability concerns, it is important to recognize that in modern high-technology warfare, technical expertise and decision-making skills are more valuable than physical strength. However, situations like the Chumar, Doklam and Galwan clashes on the Indo-China border in recent years cannot be ignored. Striking a balance between maintaining necessary standards and accommodating gender differences is a matter of ongoing debate. The physical standard attributes are well laid down by the armed forces. These form the basis of selection of an individual for training, and continuation in the combat arm thereafter. Gender should not play a role, so long as one meets the basic physical requirements to be a combatant.

Work-Life Balance

The demanding nature of work in the armed forces, involving long deployments and frequent relocations, can make it challenging for women to balance their military duties with family responsibilities. Several women in the armed forces find a life partner within the service. While this has some advantages, it is an organizational challenge for Human Resource managers. It becomes difficult to manage co-location for such couples and the problem gets accentuated at higher seniorities and particularly if both are of equal seniority and from the same branch.

Conclusion

Women have become a part of the defense services in India. Most of the teething problems have been addressed to a large extent however, gender integration is an evolutionary process. Related policy changes need to take into account the changing nature of warfare and the role of technology. Policy decisions should be made based on facts and realities rather than presumptions and preconceptions. Aspects related to women in defense services should not be politicized as a vote bank tactic.

With future war fighting becoming more sophisticated and technologically oriented, there is a growing need to tap into the large pool of human resources which includes women. The future prospects of women in the defense services will depend on continued policy reforms, social change, and the commitment of the defense establishment to provide equal opportunities to both men and women.

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