

Can We Afford to Do Away with Masculinity in the Combat Arms

Major General Jagatbir Singh (Retd)

Abstract

The paper examines the contentious issue of women serving in the combat arms of the Indian Armed Forces. As the masculine bastion of the Armed Forces moves towards incorporating policies of gender inclusion and gender neutrality, overcoming entrenched cultural biases and stereotypical prejudices, the Paper cautions against overreaching the final gendered frontier – combat. The Paper seeks to balance the right of women to equal opportunity with the challenge of equal suitability and the risk of undermining operational effectiveness and combat readiness. It warns against reproducing the template of gender equal policies of foreign militaries in the very different social and operational context of India. The author draws upon his 38 years of experience in combat arms as well as the feedback of serving and retired officers and men to provide an insider's analysis of the 'suitable' role of women in the Indian armed forces.

Author Profile

Major General Jagatbir Singh VSM (Retd.) was commissioned into 18 Cavalry of the Indian Army in December 1981. During his 38 years of service in the Army he held command, staff and instructional appointments and served in a UN Peacekeeping Mission as a Military Observer in Iraq and Kuwait between the two Gulf Wars. Since retirement in 2018, he is a prolific writer in media and journals and is Distinguished Fellow at United Services Institute, India.

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Introduction

During a recent visit to Dehra Dun to participate in the seventh edition of the seminar on ‘Military History’ at the *Welham Boys School*, I had the opportunity to interact with a group of girl cadets from the *Rashtriya Indian Military College (RIMC)*. The RIMC is an elite institution which gave the Indian Army some of its first Indian officers, and to this day its cadets fill prestigious armed services appointments in the three Services and shape the country’s strategic and operational policies. It was established in March 1922 along the model of the Imperial Cadets College in the UK, following the demands for ‘Indianization’ of the services after World War I. RIMC was designed as a preparatory public school for admission to the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst. The British believed that to become an Indian Army Officer, if an education in Britain was impossible, a Public-School education in India was a must.

RIMC an all-male Institution with its rich and prestigious heritage has opened its door to girl cadets. In March 2022, during the Centenary Celebrations, RIMC announced that the first batch of 15 girls would join RIMC Class VII. Other masculine bastions, the National Defence Academy and Sainik Schools, followed suit, opening their doors to young women and girls.

In Dehra Dun, the five young girl cadets I met were full of enthusiasm and evidently not intimidated by the overwhelming presence of boy cadets. While four of the girls spoke excitedly of wanting to be fighter pilots, another was keen on joining the Infantry. The armed forces in rank and file and practically in all streams are inducting women, including in command roles.

This paper examines the contentious issue of whether women officers should serve in the combat arms of the Indian Armed Forces, especially the Indian Army. While conceding the right to equal opportunity, the paper emphasizes the imperative of balancing gender equality with equal suitability. Globally, the armed forces of several democracies have opened up all ranks in combat arms to women. But should the template of gender equal policies of foreign Armed Services be reproduced in the social and operational context of the Indian Services? Moreover, in the Indian context, the question which arises is whether in view of our socio-cultural and operational environment, the Indian Armed Forces, particularly the institution of the Indian Army is ready to accept women in combat arms. Importantly, will operational effectiveness and combat readiness be compromised due to this change?

The debate over women serving in combat roles has been contested ever since women were inducted into the Indian Armed Forces in the early 1990s. In the early days, women officers had to face policy obstacles of being eligible only for Short Service Commissions (SSC) which limited their career progression and marginalized their presence. Also, cultural inhibitions arising from gender stereotyping and patriarchal biases in the male dominated and masculine Armed Forces denied them operational opportunities. Despite these institutional and cultural barriers, women over the last three decades achieved seniority and leadership across the Services, which today has resulted in women commanding certain units.

It has been a difficult journey since the time when in World War II, Indian women were recruited as part of the Women Auxiliary Corps (India). Since then, women served in diverse roles and arms. However, postings to combat arms remains the final gendered frontier. With time, hardened attitudes of exclusion have softened and institutional barriers fallen. Moreover, the changing complexity of the security and technological environment, and the multifarious tasks that the armed forces are called upon to perform requires greater diversity of a recruitment resource pool, skills and perspectives.

The paper begins with a historical mapping of women in the Indian Army from World War II onwards. Next is the section on female bodily characteristics which impact on women's suitability for combat arms. This is followed by an analysis of the changing nature of war and its implications for the diversification of women's roles, especially women in combat roles. The final section brings in a comparative analysis of the experiences of women in combat roles in foreign armies. The idea of this paper was prompted by a conversation with the journal's guest editor about the performance of women officers in the Indian Army, issues relating to prejudice, presumptions about gender discrimination and my own skepticism about the suitability of women in combat roles. The Paper is a work of qualitative research analysis and draws upon my service of 38 years in the Army, including command of an Armored Division, to date a 'no go' service option for women. It also draws upon my personal communications with officers and men across a wide spectrum of Arms and Services, and of diverse ages. The Paper builds upon secondary literature on this subject.

Milestones in the Journey of Women in Indian Army

World War II saw the significant entry of women in the armed service of the British Indian Army. According to Narinder Yadav of Historical Division, Ministry of Defence, women first entered the Indian Army during World War II in the Women's Auxiliary Corps, India (WASI). During World War II, the strength of the Indian Army increased from 0.2 million to 2.5 million as the Army fell short of recruitment numbers of martial races especially from the Punjab. This resulted in expanding the recruitment base not only beyond martial races, but also in the induction of women (Yadav at USI Military Heritage Festival, Delhi, 21 October 2023).

Women were part of the Military Nursing Service as early as World War I. However, in 1942 Lady Linlithgow appealed to Indian women to join the WASI. The roles assigned to women in the Army at that time were support-based roles such as that of clerks, switch board operators, store keepers, drivers and mechanics. Such support tasks were in consonance with the overall understanding of how the social structure viewed women's gendered roles.

The women recruited were in the age group of 18 to 50 years with a pay range of Rs 65 to Rs 150 per month. They needed to be literate. Enrollment was limited to the period of hostilities and they were demobilized in March 1947. At its peak in 1945, WASI had a strength of 2,161 European women, 4,366 Anglo Indian women and 4,306 Indian women. The force was oriented towards social inclusion and was mixed in community, caste and class.

The war period also saw the remarkable raising of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the *Azad Hind Fauj* of Subhash Chandra Bose. The Rani's Regiment, the first all women combat force was exceptional for its time (Hildebrand 2016). In independent India, the Armed Forces opened their doors to women in 1992, and only as officers. But it was not till the decisive ruling of the Supreme Court in the Babita Puniya case in 2020 that the gendered playing field was levelled and SSC women officers were made eligible for Permanent Commission (PC). It was then that equal career advancement opportunities became available to women.

Three decades since the entry of women officers in the Forces, the Minister of State for Defence Ajay Bhatt, told the Lok Sabha on 16 March 2023, that 7,093 women are serving in the Army, including 6,993 in the Army Medical Corps, Army Dental Corps and Military Nursing Service (MNS). Excluding medical corps, there were 1,733 officers in the army and 100 women in other ranks i.e. military police. In the Indian Air Force 1,636 women were serving and in the Indian Navy 748 (MOD PIB March 2023).

Emphasizing gender neutrality in the work conditions of the armed services, the Minister stated, "There is 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."

Specifically referring to the Army, the Minister said that consequent to the granting of PC to women officers, a 'gender-neutral' career progression policy covering employment and promotional aspects was promulgated on 23 November 2021, providing equal opportunities to women officers.

Left hanging was the question, whether gender neutral policies were capable of creating the necessary gender sensitive environment that respected and accommodated the biological differences between male and women officers. It is argued that there is the risk of distortions

creeping in because of the principle of gender-neutrality. For instance, gender sensitivity requires different assessment systems for Physical Tests (PTs) for men and women based on their biological capabilities.

The year 2023 was a landmark one for women in the Armed Forces. Opening up the ranks via the *Agniveer* scheme, 100 women soldiers joined the Military Police, and 155 airmen and 726 sailors (MoD PIB, August 2023). In the Army, women were given command of units on par with their male counterparts. 108 women officers out of 224 from 1992 to 2006 batches were screened by a Special Selection Board in January 2023 for promotion to the rank of Colonel. Those selected assumed command appointments. The Selection Board was a one-time measure to clear the backlog generated following the 2020 Supreme Court judgment granting parity for PC and promotion with their male counterparts.

In future, gender-neutral selection boards will be held. Gender-neutral policies and gender sensitive understanding will be inculcated. It is an open question whether a gender sensitive understanding will be just in letter or implemented in spirit. Within the institution of the Armed Forces, knowledge of the complexities and long-term effects of the expansion and career progression of women is comparatively limited. Foreign militaries with long decades of experience even today are grappling with basics such as properly fitting uniforms in the UK (Pfanner 2004).

Moreover, in India it has taken a three-decade long struggle to arrive at the SC judgment enforcing gender-neutral terms and conditions of service in the Armed Forces. Other advances in promoting the career prospects and progression of women in the Armed Forces have been the entry of women cadets in the National Defence Academy, enrolment of women soldiers in the Corps of Military Police and Assam Rifles and entry into Artillery. Six women officers cleared the prestigious Defence Services Staff Course (DSSC) and Defence Services Technical Staff Course (DSTSC).

Notwithstanding these impressive strides, women still are denied entry into the fighting arms-- Armored Corps and Infantry, Special Forces and Mechanized Infantry. These are the arms from which officers are drawn to form part of the General Cadre. These are officers found fit to command fighting formations. Others comprising of the General Cadre are those selected from Artillery (which contributed five Army Chiefs), Engineers (the present Army Chief), Army Air Defense and Signals.

Officers from these arms first, have to command units successfully to be recommended for General Cadre and then are selected by a Selection Board constituted at Army Headquarters by the Military Secretary's Branch. Technically, women officers belonging to these arms will qualify to be considered for the General Cadre, which in turn will make them eligible for command of armored and Infantry formations. Measuring up to merit standards, depends upon factors such as confidential reports, performance rendered in key appointments, courses attended and gallantry

awards. Present day senior women officers in command of Engineer and Army Air Defense Regiments, no matter how exceptional, labor under the disadvantage of not having attended Staff College Course thereby making them ineligible for key operational staff appointments. Until 2022, no woman officer had attended the Defense Services Staff College Course. The first batch of women officers will finish in April 2024.

In the Army, the career progression of officers is well regulated till the first Selection Board. Officers after commissioning are posted to a combat unit in an active environment, and in quick succession undergo pass promotion examinations and compete for nomination to Defense Services Staff College. In this scheme, a successful sub-unit command combined with the cumulated quantified value of the career becomes the measure for consideration for the first select rank of Colonel and the prospect of subsequent critical command assignments.

Since the first batch of women officers were inducted in 1992, much has changed. An officer who was doing his Young Officers Course along with the first batch of women officers recalled how the spotlight was on the women and felt that the instructors almost ‘spoon fed’ them to ensure that they made the grade. Prejudices and stereotypes prevailed. A Commanding Officer of an Engineer unit who had women officers serving under him, recalled a situation when he had to depute two officers from his unit to the ‘Counter Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School’ at Vairengte in Mizoram. The officers had to undergo training to become Instructors so as to carry out the pre-induction training of the unit before it was posted to the North East. He deputed a woman officer for the training.

The CO when questioned on his decision reportedly responded that the letter asking him to detail two officers made no mention of the gender of the officers. The woman officer measured up to the standards and cleared all the tests and went on to form part of the nucleus training his Regiment. Since then, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge as far as acceptance and performance of women officers was concerned. Today women are in command of units and leading from the front and leadership qualities are no longer defined by gender.

The many biases that existed have been whittled away due to the performance of the women officers. It is about the evolution of not just the women officers themselves, who initially struggled to adjust to the system and the tests, but also about the evolution of the military system. Over the years, the two, males and females have come to understand each other better. The system too, has adapted and accepted the women officers and catered better for their requirements and aspirations.

This is reflected in supportive assessments such as that of retired Lt General Rakesh Sharma and Lt Gen H.S. Panag. Writing in *The Telegraph* Lt. Gen. Rakesh Sharma pointed out that

“For women in the Army, there is a clear need for empowerment of women officers, a career management structure that features transparent progression, uniform and objective

standards and adherence to a merit-based system without any gender-specific quotas.” (Sharma 2019)

General Panag was supportive but emphasized maintenance of exacting standards. In his column in *The Print*, he stated,

“Equal opportunities based on gender neutral norms, demand equal performance. No quarter will be given and none should be asked. I have no doubts that soon all fields in the Armed Forces will be open for the women. For the Armed Forces, operational efficiency is sacrosanct. The onus is now on the women to measure up to the exacting physical, intellectual, psychological and performance standards, and the conditions of service”
(Panag 2023)

Balancing Equal Opportunity and Equal Suitability

Women’s reproductive cycle entails dealing with particular issues of personal hygiene relating to menstruation, pregnancy and motherhood. These issues can undermine operational readiness for carrying out their duties in units, and impede the combat effectiveness of a unit, especially when circumstances require prolonged leave of absence. This quandary gets accentuated in case there are more women in a unit facing similar such contingencies at the same time and who all need leaves simultaneously. A counter argument is that the development of a proper infrastructure would obviate some of these difficulties. During peacetime, such infrastructure can be developed but there are serious challenges during combat.

Given these complexities, the question arises - is the Army ready for women in combat roles when combat readiness and in the long-run National Security could be seriously compromised? It does seem that the armed services are being pushed, willingly or unwillingly, to accommodate executive decisions irrespective of whether they are appropriate and whether the institution is prepared for them. It is important to factor in that combat conditions are extremely fluid, wherein units are deployed in remote areas in the harshest of terrains, in isolated groups over prolonged periods with little administrative support in the face of the enemy. In times like these, such considerations as hygiene or privacy are non-existent.

Also, the fighting arms need raw, brute strength because of the very nature of the job at hand. Major General V.K. Singh, (retired) in a personal communication to author, recalled commanding a division when he had to take the whole formation out for a training exercise in the desert terrain. “I would not say all, but I received a sizeable number of requests from various quarters to excuse the women officers under my command from exposure to the harsh conditions,” he stated (Delhi, October 2023). Equal opportunity advocates, will decry his observation as influenced by prejudice, and pull him up for tarring all women officers with the same brush, but it does strengthen the argument about suitability and finding the correct roles for women soldiers.

Similarly, Commanding Officers of units where women officers are posted are frank about the dilemma they face when assigning operational tasks to women officers. Writing in *The Telegraph* Lt. Gen. Rakesh Sharma voiced skepticism about the advisability of including women soldiers/officers in combat roles out of concern for maintaining the cohesion of a unit with a male gender bias. He stated that, “the intangible and hygiene issues involving women are final and all-important concerns. In all debates, the physiological and biological needs, issues of spouse posting and the like get highlighted as the prime problems (Sharma 2019).” He accepted that while in peace time and in most terrains, segregated infrastructure can be built to overcome such gendered concerns, “there are other posts such as on the Siachen Glacier, along the LOC or LAC, or in small operating bases used in counter-terrorist operations where the infrastructure can only be cramped. Providing cushy assignments or protected assignments to female soldiers/officers would be counterproductive for unit cohesion, career management and parity, and male-gender bias”, the General stated (Sharma 2019).

A counter argument by gender equality advocates would be to question this presumed consensus among the women officers that they want cushy assignments? The question is to have the choice to serve in equally harsh conditions as their male counterparts. Whether women officers can survive such conditions or perform well in them is a question that comes later.

Changing Nature of War

Another argument often heard nowadays is the changing nature of war and that future wars will be less physical and more technologically oriented and psychological. In such scenarios, women can have a major role to play. However, recent experiences of wars in Ukraine and Gaza/Israel demonstrate war-fighting strategies involving heavy use of remote technology, that is, drones, counter drones, and electronic warfare to cause maximum damage to the enemy. Equally, these conflicts draw attention to the need to follow remote combat strategies with boots on the ground.

To quote from the legendary strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, “from time to time the superstructure of tactics has to be altered or wholly torn down but the foundations of strategy so far remain as though laid upon a rock” (quoted by Klein 2020). Roles in combat are interchangeable; the choices are not there for an officer to make. They have to perform where they are assigned tasks. Admittedly, the presumption that women officers in a combat unit will want or need to be assigned jobs that do not bring them into direct contact with the enemy is experientially an untested one. As a feminist scholar pointed out, “The roles that male and female officers can play in different types of combat, is a matter of conjecture because of non-availability of choice for women officers, and the fact that the decision is being taken on behalf of women officers as to what type of combat they are best suited for.” (personal communication, Delhi, November 2023)

Presently, we are on the cusp of a fundamental change in the character of war. Technology, geopolitics, and demographics are rapidly changing societies, economies, and the tools of warfare. They are also producing changes in why, how, and where wars are fought, and who will fight them. The significantly increased speed and global reach of information (and misinformation) likewise will have an unprecedented effect on forces and how they fight.

Mary Kaldor in *New and Old Wars* described the new wars of the era of globalization and the post-Cold War international order as characterized by the demise of interstate war and proliferation of conflicts arising from civil strife (Kaldor 2007). In the new millennium, Kaldor (2007) and theorist Steven Pinker (2011) argued that the role of the state and indeed violence in general, was in terminal decline and the world was becoming more peaceful. Peter Singer captured the popular imagination with his illustration of war fought with cyber, electronic and robotic systems (Singer 2009), while Christopher Coker argued that with rapid development of AI, this may be the last chance that humans have to determine the nature of war (Coker 2010).

Historically, how war is fought changes as thinking and technology advances. Today the power of information—in data processing, AI, robotics, bio-science, materials—is the latest inflection point of transformation to occur in history. Nevertheless, scholars of strategic culture are aware that some characteristics, norms, and ideas from the past are enduring, in part because of political systems, legal regimes, economic structures, geography and human nature.

In the modern era technological and industrial developments pervading economies and societies gave rise to the assessment that specific weapon systems, transportation, and powered flight had changed war's nature. Can these arbiters of change replace men with machines? Are we in an era where combat, at the point of decision, is no longer a physical duel? With the passage of time, growing technical innovations have led to smart weapon systems. Battle lines are blurred from formal boundaries on the map to one's own backyard. With growing complexities, the structure of fighting forces too evolved on thoroughly professional lines with combat, too emerging as a highly specialized skill. The essence is that while the character of war is changing the nature of war is enduring.

Considering these changing trends, women should be allowed to serve as per operational requirements and suitability, but without compromising standards at any cost. Women can make a major contribution in combat based on their skill sets. Conventionally, it has been presumed by male decision makers that the fields suitable for women are technology, intelligence, cyber, space, logistics, and training. In view of the changing nature of warfare these are the new frontiers where women officers can tenant responsibilities; show their flair and grit as virtual combatants. Feminist scholars contest that women combatants are being denied choice. They acknowledge the caveat of standards being absolute, but also emphasize that exacting fitness standards should apply to male

officers as well. However, even accepting women's entitlement to choose, the suitability of women replacing men in physical combat has its limitations.

Women in Combat Roles

Many women officers seek assignment to combat roles as a desirable goal. Countries such as the USA, Britain, Canada, and Israel have assigned combat roles to women soldiers. In India, particularly in the Indian Army, the induction of women in combat roles cannot be an emotional decision for satisfying the equal opportunity aspirations of women. It needs to be examined on the basis of operational efficiency and capability to function in gender neutral conditions in actual combat as part of a team.

Also, are we taking the norm of 'gender neutrality' too far? The conditions in other countries, where women were inducted into the defense forces in all arms, were quite different from those prevailing in India (details are discussed below). This is not to argue that women should not get the opportunity to serve in uniform but there is need to find a suitable role for them, where they contribute to the cause and feel comfortable. It is wasteful and personally frustrating to spend a lifetime trying to prove that you can do everything that a man can do.

There is no doubt that males and females are physically different and giving equality in roles which are more suitable for men will have adverse impact during combat. Military Studies scholar Martin Van Creveld has shown the negative impact of inducting women into Israel Defence Forces (IDF) especially the infantry. Corroborating this assessment, a US Marine Corps study of 2015 study found that the male combatant group outperformed in every aspect the mixed combatant group of women and men (Lamothe 2015).

It is a fact that females have done exceptionally well in sports measuring up to formidable physical standards. Equally, it is a fact that competition has been amongst female contestants only. In close and intense hand to hand combat, which is a possibility along India's contested borders with both Pakistan and China on the LOC and LAC, and where incidents like the Galwan physical assault happened, women would be at a distinct disadvantage.

Recognizing such gendered challenges, Maj. Gen. Yash Mor speaking to the media on women in the armed forces, explained why in the Armoured Corps, Mechanised Infantry and Infantry units of the Army women were not inducted in command-

"I believe that increasing female representation in leadership in these arms will take time and we should not rush this process. Physical combat or direct ground combat involved, engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force's personnel. Direct ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while

locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuvers, or shock effect" (Lal 2023).

My own experience in the Armored Corps showed up the difficulties involved in inducting women into the Mechanized Forces. For instance, a tank crew, is traditionally, a three-man crew consisting of a driver, gunner and commander who operate on a weapon platform which is extremely cramped, in extremes of temperatures with no heating and cooling. The next tank can be at a distance of 50 to 500 meters in combat and functioning contact among the crew and outside is via the radio, so the head set is always on. Replenishment in battle takes place during a lull and always at night which involves loading ammunition the weight of which varies and is approximately 50 kilograms. Also, fuel comes in barrels of 200 liters from a truck which can be at a distance from the tank. Preparing a tank for combat is physically exhausting. Operating in a combat environment tests human endurance. The crew live around the tank and the engine deck or side of the tank is where you rest. There is no possibility of privacy. Also, all the crew members of a tank unit are trained to fulfil dual functions, and required to perform multiple tasks most of which demand physical strength. Will women soldiers/officers be able to adapt and not compromise the operational efficiency of our front-line troops?

Similarly, in the case of women appointed to Artillery Regiments, an artillery officer was openly skeptical about how women would be sent as Observation Post Officers with the forward troops. It is mandatory as far as young officers are concerned. In a personal communication, he voiced the doubts and concerns of many serving and veteran officers that in the interest of ticking the right boxes on gender equality the Army's professionalism will be affected. There is a widespread sentiment that women are pampered and, in the process, marginalized because Commanding Officers do not wish to be confronted with problems regarding their deployment.

Are Modern War Environments an Ill-fit for Women Soldiers?

Modern war is a 360-degree war, as frontlines become fluid and unpredictable, encompassing entire territories. That time is long past when soldiers on the frontline were the only ones threatened by war. Soldiers in the rear, as well as entire national territories are now within the reach of long-range artillery, combat aircraft and missiles with powerful radii and sophisticated launch platforms. Therefore, although women soldiers may be excluded from offensive operations, a combat exclusion policy realistically does not exclude women from high-risk combat zones.

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many assumed that wars among European powers, if they happened at all, would not be like earlier ones. They would be fought using a new generation of advanced technologies, including autonomous weapons systems. They would play out in space and cyberspace; boots on the ground would probably not matter much. On the contrary, the world has had to come to terms with a war on European soil, fought by large armies and in some aspects no different from that of the First World War. The Ukraine War and the Israel-Hamas war have

foregrounded the savagery and brutality of conflict. Ukraine is a battle of ‘attrition’, a long war with no end in sight. Israel-Hamas war involves urban warfare, which again demands boots on the ground.

In the Indian context, our borders with both our principal adversaries are contested. The Indian Army is deployed in one of the harshest terrains, and is at ‘eye ball to eye ball’ distance with firing often breaking the silence. In Galwan, in 2020, we saw primitive and barbaric means of engagement. Life on a forward post is high risk and demanding. The treatment meted out to a woman POW can be a national embarrassment. In Counter Insurgency/ Counter Terrorism deployment along the LOC if a woman officer is captured and killed, mutilation can be traumatic with cascading fallouts. Given these concerns, it can be argued that there are sound practical reasons why not giving a combat role to a woman is not gender discrimination but gender prudence.

Foreign Armies

In the United States formal restriction on women in combat became increasingly meaningless in the post-9/11 world where some 280,000 women were deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan and 130 died. A number of programs—the Lioness program, Female Engagement Teams, and Cultural Support Teams—saw women supporting ground combat and Special Forces teams. Drawing upon the practical evidence of women’s involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, in 2012 two lawsuits were filed which contested the 1994 restriction on women serving in combat. In 2013, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced the plan to lift the ban on women in combat that came into effect in 2015. A crucial element in the decision to rescind the ban was the difficulties the all-volunteer male force was facing to meet its recruiting quotas. (Rosenberg and Philipps 2015)

Also instrumental in promoting this change was the commitment of Leon Panetta, himself an Army veteran who had served in Congress, was White House Chief of Staff and led the CIA and Pentagon. He was flown into and around conflict zones by women pilots and made aware of the collapsing of distinction between what was considered combat and what was not. At a press conference, Panetta supported women being given the opportunity to serve in any capacity if they are able to do the job. “There’s no reason not to”, he said. He poignantly described going to Arlington National Cemetery for funerals. “They serve, they are wounded and they died right next to each other. They’re fighting and dying together, and the time has come for our policies to reflect that reality”, Panetta said. (Brook 2023)

The **US Army** by 2019 had 46 women who had graduated from Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course, 72 women from the Armor Basic Officer Leader Course, and 270 enlisted women from Infantry and Armor One Station Unit Training. Within a couple of months, 1,055 women were training in combat specialties, 653 women had completed training and were serving in combat roles. The attrition rate for women during their initial training in these previously all male schools ranged from 11 to 72 percent (infantry 49 percent, field artillery 11 percent, and armor 72 percent).

For their male counterpart attrition rates ranged from 0.46 to 18 percent (infantry 18 percent, field artillery 0.46 percent, and armor 17 percent). Presently, all active-duty Brigade Combat Teams for Infantry, Armour, and Artillery fields include female soldiers (Moore 2020).

The Marine Corps, is the only Service to hold out against the policy of force wide gender integration. Under pressure, the Marine Corps commissioned a study in 2015 to examine the impact of gender integration. Former Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus criticized the study and the Marine Corps' negative attitude. "It started out with a fairly large component of the men thinking 'this is not a good idea,' and 'women will never be able to do this'," he stated. "When you start out with that mindset, you're almost presupposing the outcome," said former Secretary Navy (Moore 2020). At the insistence of Congress to gender integrate fully, an academic study was instituted in 2019 to audit gender-integrated Marine Combat Training which reluctantly was introduced in 2018. (Snow 2018)

Special operations forces (SOF) remained a community where integrating women has not been successful. None of the traditional SOF components—Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Marine Raiders, or Air Force Special Tactics—have been gender integrated, though multiple women have entered the selection pipelines. Functional barriers to entry are the high failure and attrition rates of assessment and selection combined with injury-related eliminations.

A decade since the Pentagon repealed the ban on women serving in ground combat positions, female soldiers have risen in the ranks of frontline units. But as a recent Pentagon 2023 Survey revealed, the intractable problem of sexual assault and harassment in the ranks threatens progress (Brook 2023).

British military followed suit on gender integration. In 2018, the military lifted a ban on women serving in close combat ground roles, clearing the way for them to serve in elite special forces. Skeptics were aplenty who voiced doubts about mixed-gender teams in close combat lacking cohesion, and about women not clearing the requisite physical fitness tests.

Israel has the longest historical experience of women in all arms of modern militaries. However, apart from the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, when extreme manpower shortages brought many female Israeli soldiers into land battles, women were historically prohibited by the Israeli government to go into battle, and instead served in a variety of technical and administrative support roles. Soon after the establishment of the Israel Defence Forces, a decree for the withdrawal of women from frontline positions was brought into effect, and all female soldiers accordingly were pulled back into more secure areas. The cited rationale for this decision involved concerns over the high possibility of female Israeli soldiers being captured and subsequently raped or sexually assaulted by hostile Arab forces.

Presently, women form part of combat units, the most notable being the Light-Infantry Caracal Battalion, in which women comprise 70 percent of the troop strength. There are two other mixed-sex infantry battalions. Women are also allowed to join the Combat Intelligence Collection Corps, and to serve as search-and-rescue personnel in the IDF's Home Front Command. Women also serve as tank crews in the Border Defense Area, constituting units that guard the borders of Israel with Egypt and Jordan (Halevy 2023).

Despite being officially classified as combat soldiers, women in combat roles are not explicitly deployed in combat situations. The three mixed-sex infantry battalions and female-crew tanks are deployed for border patrol and security duties in the Jordan Valley. Female soldiers are barred from joining frontline combat brigades that are deployed in the event of war.

UN Forces comprise of mixed battalions of men and women soldiers under diverse commands. Lt. Gen. Harinder Singh (ret'd), while discussing leadership capabilities with IMA cadets, recalled his experience of commanding a multi-national UN peacekeeping Brigade in the Democratic Republic of Congo, within which he had a South African Mechanized Infantry Battalion. One of the Companies was commanded by a woman and he singled her out as one of the best commanders. Not only did the battalion carry out operational tasks assigned in an exceptional manner, but there seemed to be no difference in the performance of men and women. Platoons and Companies were all mixed, even to the extent of billeting arrangements. Men and women soldiers slept in a mixed manner in the same tents, bathed in the same field bathrooms and used common lavatories with only a thin curtain separating them. He said there were no special privileges accorded to the women, however there were strict orders against any 'romancing' between the troops, and violation would result in 'dismissal'.

It does seem difficult to contemplate such a situation in an Indian context where young men and women in the prime of their youth would be thrown together for prolonged periods in emotionally intense situations in isolated locations. In all probability, such mixed gender units in the Indian context would impair operational functionality and efficiency of a unit.

Having commanded Counter Insurgency Division in and a Corps during active operations on the Line of Control in Eastern Ladakh, Lt. Gen. Singh was of the opinion that women in combat arms in Indian circumstances can only be considered if the 'privileges' accorded to women are removed. For instance, many women officers are posted to what was the state of Jammu & Kashmir and are serving in 'Counter Insurgency' operations there. But they are not occupying posts on the Line of Control, doing patrolling or engaged in physical operations.

There are cultural and social barriers to imagining women serving in combat roles in the South Asian region where patriarchal values and practices are entrenched. The practices normalized within the South African army cannot be incorporated within the Indian context. We have deep

rooted patriarchal ways of defining roles which also define our understanding of capabilities and situations related to gender roles.

Conclusion

In the 21st century, women are performing at par with their male counterparts. In some areas, females have outperformed males. However, combat operations are different. They involve matters of life and death. At stake is national security. Women have an increasingly expanding role in the Army and the focus must remain on utilizing them in a manner that reflects their strength and enhances the operational efficiency of the forces. The focus must be on recruiting and utilizing women where they fit into our Indian environment and not impose another country's template onto us. Women can be employed in an AI unit, a Cyber Warfare unit or a Psychological Warfare unit, and even as Drone/UAV operators. These are not front-line tasks.

It is a fact that over the last thirty years great strides have been made in the Army as far as the women are concerned. There has been a widening of tasks assigned and responsibilities given to women, including command of units. The contribution of women has been immense and at no stage is there doubt about their courage, dedication, commitment, sense of responsibility, professional competence and leadership qualities. However, posting women to combat units in our present cultural environment has its drawbacks both from a personal and professional point of view.

Women may claim that the Constitution allows them to choose the profession they desire, however, it is the responsibility of the government and the Army to assess the suitability of employment of women soldiers for combat roles. Women do have a role to play but the question remains whether that role should be in all streams. This issue needs to be looked at from the point of view of operational imperatives and service conditions rather than from a gender equality approach.

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