

Women in the Indian Military: Debates and Lessons on Gender Integration

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the debates, decisions, and controversies with reference to the induction of women in the Indian armed forces and its implications for gender integration. These debates are contextualized within a comparative framework that offers some prescriptions on the role of women in the Indian military from four main lenses: expansion of diverse roles for women in the Indian armed and police services and the accompanying rationale, the causes explaining why more Indian women are seeking careers in the armed forces, the obstacles to gender integration in the Indian military, and why women are yet to be included in combat roles.

Author Profile

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Introduction

In early 2016, India announced the decision to allow women to occupy combat roles in all sections of its army, navy, and air force (Al Jazeera 2016). Expectedly, in India as elsewhere in the world, discussions around the subject of the inclusion of women in combat arms have been equally contentious. Moreover, it was unclear what roles women in combat will perform and just how difficult the implementation process will be. Seven years later, in January 2023, of the 40 women to graduate from the Officers Training Academy (OTA) in Chennai, 10 officers were allotted positions in the Indian artillery. While this is a markedly important step in helping women arrive at parity with their male peers, full equality can only be realized when women are permitted entry into the infantry and mechanized infantry. Interestingly, all three services in the Indian military have adopted uneven approaches to embracing women in combat. The Indian Air Force is far ahead of the other two arms with women serving as fighter pilots in combat roles. The navy, too, is catching up with female naval officers and sailors on warships. The Indian army has been the slowest in gender inclusion.

What administrative, political, social, and cultural challenges stand in the way of women achieving an equal status in the Indian military? Such questions are being raised because India is a late entrant on the subject of gender inclusion, and especially combat inclusion, which continues to be an exclusive male role. This paper attempts to address the importance of women in combat inclusion, the overall rationale for this inclusion, ongoing debates on the subject and inhibitors to gender integration. The paper begins by situating the topic within the Indian context, outlines key decisions and controversies, discusses challenges specific to gender integration of women in the Indian military, and offers a comparative perspective on the issue by illustrating the role of women in combat in the Western countries.

Historical Context

Indian history is replete with examples of women warriors who were trained not just in the rules of warfare but were expert fighters who pushed back against invading foreign and colonial powers, whether it was the Portuguese or the British. There is a rich history of women adopting such roles. In Karnataka, there was Abbakka Chowta (1525-1570), known to be an impressive warrior and military strategist, who defended her state Ullal against the Portuguese forces. (E-KAVI/

WordPress 2007). Another notable figure was the colorful Begum Samroo, India's only Catholic queen. In 1783, she negotiated a settlement with the Sikh General Baghel Singh at Tis Hazari, averting an attack on Delhi in exchange for a generous payment by Shah Alam. When the Rohilla chieftain Ghulam Abd al Qadir Ahmed Khan launched an audacious attack on the Red Fort in 1787, Begum Samroo broke the siege of Red Fort (Storytrails 2023). Another Begum who successfully mobilized troops against British rule was Begum Hazrat Mahal, wife of the deposed Nawab of Oudh. During the *Sepoy Mutiny* of 1857, she used the support of freedom fighters to capture the state of Lucknow and was successful in revolting against British rule in other locations. One of the most popular female warriors in Indian history is Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi. Skilled in archery, horse-riding, and sword fighting, she refused to surrender to British forces and was one of the key figures who led the Revolt of 1857. India also boasts a rich history of female warriors in its anti-colonial struggles.

Post-independence, Indian women have served in combat roles in many of India's left revolutionary insurgent movements as far back as the 1950s and 60s (Kannabiran 1990). Presently, women continue to participate in a variety of militant movements inspired by Marxist revolutionary ideals, even leading from the front as commanders (Kamra 2014). This history of women in combat makes it all the more perplexing why the role of women in combat in the Indian armed forces has received so little attention and visibility in any serious debates on defense and security. Are Indian women incapable or irrelevant in defending the nation? Are they viewed as incompetent or unequal? These questions are central to analyzing the unequal role of women in the Indian armed forces. Existing literature from the United States, Israel, Norway and other Western countries provides some insights into the contentious issues that surround the debate on women serving in the military.

Towards Gender Integration: Permanent Commission

In India, in a 1.4 million strong army, women officer cadres in the armed forces, including the medical corps, account for 1.52% of the force. According to Ministry of Defence statistics for 2023, current force levels of women officers in the Army are 1733 (excluding medical and dental corps strength of 6993), in the Air Force 1654, and in the Indian Navy 580 (MoD 2023). There has been a steady increase since 2015 when female officer strength was 1436 in the Army, 1328 in the Air Force, 413 in the Indian Navy.

India began recruiting women in non-medical positions in the armed forces in 1992. Prior to the 1990s, women served in the Army Medical Corps. As a first step to including women in the other services of the Indian armed forces, on 30 January 1992, Government of India opened up opportunities for women as officers in certain specific branches of the Indian army like Army Education Corps, Army Ordnance Corps and Army Postal Service. These women were to be granted Short Service Commission (SSC) if they served for five years (Mishra et al 2022). In

December 1992, enrollment was expanded to include women in five other departments: Corps of Signals, Intelligence Corps, Corps of Engineers, Corps of Electrical and Mechanical Engineering, and the Artillery Regiment. Not satisfied with merely serving as short service commissioned members, the early 2000s saw several women file cases in the Delhi High Court seeking Permanent Commission (PC) in the army and to be considered on par with their male counterparts. Some notable cases of writ petitions filed were those of Babita Puniya in February 2003 and Major Leena Gaurav in 2006 (Mishra et al 2022).

In 2010, the Delhi High Court delivered a judgment allowing women to hold PC in the army and air force. Despite procrastination by the institution, including appealing the judgment, the army granted PC to 340 women (*The Hindu* 2015). The Air Force showed greater responsiveness including inducting women pilots in the fighter stream. The recommendations were largely ignored by the Indian navy which had not been included in the Babita Puniya petition. In 2015, the Delhi High Court ruled that the navy must grant PC to women (*The Hindu* 2015a). Until then, women were only eligible to qualify for SSC and served for 14 years. This denied them career progression and excluded them from receiving pensions and other privileges. The Court ruling guaranteed that women could work until the age of 54 years just like their male counterparts. The decision was a result of 19 women filing petitions before the court on grounds of discrimination stating that while they had received the same training as their male peers and worked for comparable years, their gender was being used to limit them from serving to full capacity (*The Hindu* 2015).

If securing access to PC was hard for women in the Indian armed forces, it has been harder to sustain the argument for women in combat. Earlier in 2012, the Ministry of Defense had communicated to the Supreme Court its full-throated refusal to grant PC status to women officers in combat wings such as the infantry, mechanized infantry, and armored corps (Rediff News 2012). In an additional affidavit filed before the apex court, the Ministry of Defense argued that as combat support arms/ services are required to sustain the rigors of battle in conflict zones, women must be kept out of it (Singh 2012). The government, while agreeing to comply with the court's directions in relation to the air force, was clearly opposed to extending the same benefit to women within the army in combat and support arms. In an affidavit to the Supreme Court, outlining reasons for the exclusion of women from combat, the Ministry of Defense made several claims. First, "close proximity to the enemy and attendant hazards of battle" which include the possibility of being captured as prisoners of war, would rule out granting permanent commission to women officers in combat arms like infantry, mechanized infantry, and armored corps because it involved direct combat with the enemy. Second, regarding the granting of permanent commission to women officers in combat support arms like engineers, signals, army air defense, intelligence and services like electronics mechanical engineers, army service corps and army ordnance corps, the issue would require further examination. Third, prolonged absence of women from their units in the event of family related issues would be detrimental to the cohesiveness of India's fighting force.

A growing demand for spouse/choice postings from women officers adversely impacts management of officers and works to the detriment of male officers” (Singh 2012).

Media reports based on the affidavit, further indicated that women officers' response to participation in the scheduled training courses for career progression in the institution was far from encouraging. “Women officers had declined to go on courses of instructions, bound by either family commitments or personal problems. In addition, numerous requests for choices/spouse posting had also been received from women officers,” the affidavit was quoted as stating, to justify its negative stance. The conclusion was that women should be excluded from combat roles not only for the present but as a matter of policy for all times (Rediff News 2012). Corroborating this, Defense Minister A.K. Antony told Parliament that there was no proposal to induct women in combat arms of the three services and further stated that “induction of women in combat duties had not been recommended by studies carried out by the headquarters Integrated Defense Staff in 2006 and high-level tri-services committee in 2011” (Rediff News 2012).

The debate acquired a new momentum in early 2016 when the government announced that women would be allowed to occupy combat roles in all sections of the three services -army, navy and air force. Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, while addressing both houses of parliament, in February 2016, made a case for including women in combat roles in all three services. His statement read as follows: “my government has approved the induction of women as short service commission officers and as fighter pilots in the Indian Air Force” (Al Jazeera 25 Feb 2016). In 2020, Indian Army Chief Bipin Rawat stirred up a massive controversy when he said women were not ready for combat roles (Biswas 2020).

The process of women’s inclusion in the non-officer cadre or ‘other ranks’ of armed forces, beginning with the induction of women in the military police corps, could help ease inhibitions about women in combat. The Military police perform a variety of functions. It polices cantonments, army establishments, prevents breach of rules and regulations by soldiers and maintains movement of soldiers as well as logistics during peace and war. Can it be argued that the induction of women in the military police corps could be used as a pilot run or experiment to evaluate female performance in combat? Can the induction of women in the military police corps be the first and necessary step in establishing their permanent presence in combat arms? What would be the proposed timeline for implementing the program? In 2017, India’s first female defense minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, approved a plan to induct 800 women in the military police (*Sputnik International* September 13, 2017). Later she provided a justification for this decision by stating the following:

“A decision has been taken to introduce women in all ranks starting from the Corps of Military Police. With the increasing need for investigation against gender specific

allegations and crime, a necessity was felt to introduce women in Corps of Military Police”
(*The Hindustan Times* 2019)

A separate milestone for women in India’s Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) was met in March 2016 when the Ministry of Home Affairs reserved spaces for women in constabulary in the paramilitary, as they could also be inducted as officers in combat roles in all five Central Armed Police Forces. The new rules allowed women to apply as direct-entry officers in guarding borders as part of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police Force (ITBP), the only paramilitary unit which did not allow women to join in supervisory combat roles. Among the five Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs), the CRPF, Central Industrial Security Force, BSF, and Sashastra Seema Bal have allowed women to apply as direct-entry officers. By opening the same posts to women in ITBP, most restrictions were lifted. Women have been commissioned as Assistant Commandants which is the direct-entry level for officers in ITBP after undergoing training for 52 weeks.

Shifting the Perception of Military Women: “Why not Women and not Why Women!”

Within the three wings of the armed forces, the right of women to choose to serve in combat roles has met with a measured but differentiated response depending upon the different standards and specific requirements of the three services. The Indian air force and navy are the most vocal proponents of recruiting women fighter pilots, while the army is the most resistant to opening up combat streams. Women in the Indian air force were inducted into fighter roles in June 2017 on a three-year experimental basis. India’s first female combat aircraft pilots were assigned to Sukhoi-30 squadrons, and trained on British Hawk advanced jet trainers. Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal B.S. Dhanoa, favorably observed that “their performance has been on par with other pilots despite the strenuous and demanding nature of flying.” (*The First Post* 2017). In 2018, flying officer Avani Chaturvedi became the first female pilot to fly a fighter aircraft. In 2023, she participated in aerial war games with Japan. Women fighter pilots in the Indian air force have achieved the status of equal members of the air force. In 2020, the navy announced the deployment of its first batch of women pilots aboard the Dornier maritime aircraft. Currently, some 50 women naval officers are deployed on major warships like aircraft carriers, destroyers and frigates, and several serve in its aviation wing.

Within the three services, there are some who seek greater integration for women in the armed forces, while others are resistant. Drawing upon the testimonies of some of the high-ranking women in the army, air force and navy, it appears that those who are opposed to Indian women’s inclusion especially in combat roles, are motivated by concerns about women’s vulnerability. As a chorus, the concern is voiced - what if women are captured as prisoners of war? Will they have the physical and mental ability to cope with frontline deployments? Then there is concern over the psychological impact of heavy shelling and border infiltration bids on women? How will women cope with the constricted spaces for women on warships and submarines (Gady 2017)? In contrast

to the skeptics, most women who have served in the three services are in favor of including women in combat roles. In the summer of 2018, two senior women who served in the Indian air force and army were interviewed. Below are excerpts from the conversations with them:

“People have to change. Mindsets have to change. We have come a long way from 40 years. Women are becoming more independent. While men must treat women equally, women too must learn to work with men. We need more fighter pilots. To be a pilot, you don’t need masculine power. What is needed is technical acumen; brain-oriented technology. Everyone is treated the same in the Indian armed forces. I would like everyone to join the armed forces so India becomes a better country. There should be no difference between male and female ...”

-Air Marshal Padma Bandopadhyay (Author’s Interview, New Delhi, July 2018)

“The fear of women in combat is misplaced. What are the armed forces scared about? Much of the reasons they give are cultural, related to performance, and being captured as prisoners of war. We need to improve the psyche of men. Women need to raise their sons to respect both men and women as human beings. Give me good parents and I’ll give you an excellent nation! With more women joining the armed forces, perceptions are changing. Now women can avail maternity leave, child-care leave, and other facilities. The organization itself has grown to accept women in the armed forces. Women, too, have grown to understand their roles. When accepting women in the forces, the armed forces should always ask: “why not women; not why women.”

-Lt. Gen. Puneeta Arora (Author’s Interview, New Delhi, July 2018)

Comparative Lessons from the West

What lessons does a comparative analysis of the experiences of gender integration in combat in the armed services of countries in the West reveal? Globally, the evidence suggests that women still constitute a small percentage of the fighting forces in the world and the struggle for gender equality in the military remains a continuing reality.

US Military

The year 2015 was a remarkable moment for gender integration in the US military when Capt. Kristen Griest and 1st Lt. Shaye Haver made history as the first two women to graduate from the U.S. Army's elite Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Their induction itself was historic and the official decision to open all military positions to women came soon after. On December 3, 2015, Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced that “all military positions would be open to women, without exception, as long as they qualify and meet specific standards.” (US DoD 2015) “They’ll be allowed to drive tanks, fire mortars and lead infantry soldiers into combat,” Carter explained. “They’ll be able to serve as Army Rangers and Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Marine

Corps infantry, Air Force parajumpers, and everything else that was previously open only to men,” he added. While 111,000 positions had been made available to women since 2013, about twice as many 220,000 had remained closed. Infantry, armor, reconnaissance, and special ops were the main positions that remained closed to women.

As comparative data from western countries revealed, the fight for gender integration in the US military has been long, contentious, and difficult. These decisions were often highly politicized, and many serving women had to face constant sexual harassment. Women were excluded from combat based on “assumptions of biological essentialism, stereotypes and generalizations around women, and a desire to protect male spaces” (Nagel, Spears and Maenza 2021, 10). Certain key decisions shaped the debate in the US leading to changes in current policy. Among the most important were – i) the creation of an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973; ii) the participation of women in actual ground combat in the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan military operations and its impact on the perceptions of members serving in the military and the public outside it; and iii) a series of controversial legislations, some positive, others negative.

First, the transition from a conscripted, enlisted force to an all-volunteer military in 1973 led to women serving in active duty in the military and subsequently the accommodation of women in combat operations. The Department of Defense agreed that women were needed to fill the ranks. The anti-military attitudes in society generated by the war in Vietnam had led to labor shortages, compelling the American military to search for personnel to fill the gap. An important marker was when in 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed Public Law 95-485 disbanding the all-female WAC and permitted women in the navy to be assigned duties on board non-combatant ships. In 1982, amidst a renewed debate evaluating women’s readiness in combat, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, in a memorandum to the heads of the Army, Navy and Air Force noted: “this department must aggressively break down those remaining barriers that prevent us from making the fullest use of the capabilities of women.” (*The New York Times* 1982) “This Administration desires to increase the role of women in the military and I expect the service secretaries actively to support that policy. While we have made much progress, some institutional barriers still exist. I ask that you personally review your service policies to ensure that women are not subject to discrimination in recruiting or career opportunities”, Wienberger stated (*The New York Times* 1982).

Second, the role of women in actual ground combat operations and the engagement of male members with female counterparts left a deep impression, beginning with Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm when women constituted only seven percent of the 500,000 US troops deployed in the Persian Gulf War. In the post-Persian Gulf War phase, Congress felt compelled to change the 1998 Combat Exclusion law, since everyone on the battlefield was at risk. Service women were a visible presence in battle in Iraq and Afghanistan as a part of important support teams in counterinsurgency operations and in assisting the Army and Marine Corps units in ‘winning the

hearts and minds' of local populations. In Afghanistan, they worked closely in 'female engagement teams' to gain vital information, interact with local Afghan women, and empower locals." (McSally 2011, 158) While they were still in combat support positions, women participated in firefights and close combat with enemy forces. Compared to other services, the U.S. army deployed many more personnel on the frontlines and had the largest number of women participating in ground combat in those theaters.

Did the presence of women in such roles favorably influence the perceptions of their peers inside and outside the military? Overall, integration surveys conducted by multiple academies showed greater support for integrating women in all-male combat units. However, men were more accepting of women if they had prior experience of working with a female supervisor, had close female friends in the army, or worked with women in the army (Szayana et al. 2015).

Third, a series of Congressional legislations and Department of Defense (DoD) policy directives significantly influenced the inclusion/exclusion debate surrounding women in combat. With the 1992 and 1993 National Defense Authorization Acts, Congress revoked the prohibition of women's assignments to combat aircraft in the navy, air force, and marines. In 1994, a new DoD rule allowed all service members to be assigned to all positions for which they qualify, but excluded women from assignments to units below the brigade level whose primary missions is direct combat. By 2002, approximately 60 percent of Army positions were open to women. In 2011, the National Defense Authorization Act directed the Secretary of Defense to undertake a formal review of gender-restricting policies. In 2012, the Army announced it would open 14,000 combat-related jobs in six military occupational specialties at the battalion level (Szayana et al 2015).

Norwegian Armed Forces

Norway made tremendous strides in breaking down gender barriers to integration. In the 1980s, its parliament introduced legislation that opened up all military roles to women. Norway became the first NATO country to introduce female conscription in 2016. The introduction of the all-female Special Forces unit in 2014 raised the profile of women in the Norwegian military. The unit was created after Norway's Armed Forces' Special Command saw an increasing need for women in Special Forces— particularly in places like Afghanistan where male troops were forbidden from communicating with women. Inability to access half the population, was having a detrimental impact on intelligence gathering and building community relations. "When [Norwegian forces were] deployed to Afghanistan, we saw that we needed female soldiers, both as female advisers for the Afghan special police unit that we mentored, but also when we did an arrest," Col. Frode Kristofferson, the commander of Norway's Special Forces told the media. "We needed female soldiers to take care of the women and children in the buildings that we searched", he added (Angerer 2017). Norway's success in gender integration has its roots in an egalitarian national culture where equality in principle and practice is a widespread concept. According to a

2015 RAND Corporation study, the Norwegian model contains important lessons for gender integration, including “the need to focus on retention in addition to recruitment and the use of training programs as a way to integrate women throughout the force” (Schaefer et al 2015, 72).

The Norwegian military has also employed women in all ground combat specialties, and in all units, since the early 1980s and evidence suggested that women’s inclusion actually improved operational effectiveness, indicating that there is no link between their inclusion in combat and adverse impact on unit cohesion. Despite the Norwegian Military being one of the best models for combat inclusiveness, less than nine percent of Norway’s service members were women (Gustavsen 2013, 362) However after the introduction of conscription, gender ratio for conscripts was more than 34 percent for females in 2022 though retention remained low at 15 percent (Norwegian Armed Forces 2022).

Israeli Defense Forces

In the Israel Defense Force (IDF), women comprised 34 percent of the force. They are conscripted along with their male peers. Although the IDF restricts the service of women to 88 percent of available positions, women serve in close combat positions in the Caracal Combat Regiment and in Border Patrol battalions. Units that exclude women have done so on religious grounds based on orthodox Jewish rules. The Caracal Battalion was formed in 2004 with the purpose of giving women a chance to serve in combat roles. It is a mixed gender combat battalion and named after a desert cat whose gender is difficult to identify. The battalion is 60 percent female and patrols Israel's border with Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, a desolate stretch of high desert that has become a hot spot in recent years: In 2011, eight Israelis died in an attack launched from Sinai (Abramson 2013).

Women make up about 16 percent of artillery jobs, 15 percent of field intelligence, 21 percent of nuclear, biological, chemical occupations, 14 percent of the Commando K9 unit and 68 percent of light infantry (Schaefer et al 2015, 61). The IDF has followed several strategies to integrate women in combat positions. It has used gender-neutral and gender-proportional standards, a phased integration process, modifications to equipment and combat gear and a set of legal procedures for addressing sexual harassment.

The IDF has served as a notable, although not perfect model for evaluating the performance of women in combat. Ellen Haring (2013) in *Parameters* citing a 2005 study quotes Israeli commanders as stating that female combatants exhibit superior skills in (1) discipline and motivation, (2) maintaining alertness, (3) shooting, (4) managing tasks and organization, and (5) displaying knowledge and professionalism in weapons use.

While western models of gender integration may not apply to India, the experiences of women in these armed forces are likely to be similar in many respects and available evidence of gender inclusion holds many lessons. Indian women in combat are likely to face many of the same

challenges that women in the US, Norwegian, Israeli and other defense forces experienced. As discussed in the next section, some challenges will be potentially harder to navigate because of deeply gendered divisions in society, a patriarchal culture, and procedural and institutional problems in training and professionalism.

Arguments for Gender Integration in the Indian Forces

Several arguments are made in support of the induction of Indian women in all combat arms. First, the overarching argument for inclusion is one of equality. Women must have the same access and opportunities in the defense sector as their male counterparts. The aversion to women in combat roles in India is rooted in deeply patriarchal structures that see no incentive to change and are opposed to including women in occupations that give them the opportunity to serve on a level-playing field with men. By denying women the right to exercise choice in applying for such jobs, women are marginalized by further segregating them and reinforcing traditional stereotypes.

Second, women have proved that they are physically capable of performing the same tasks as their male counterparts. Western research on the subject provides extensive evidence. Studies showed that women are equally capable of performing in combat roles as men. Data from the 2011 class at West Point academy in the US revealed that over 52 percent of female cadets passed the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) based on male standards (Dietz 2011, 137-138). It cannot be doubted that the Indian context is different. However, India has a large female unskilled labor force that works in construction and factories where they are involved in heavy lifting and operate heavy machinery. They also perform tasks that require physical strength. The fetishization of physical fitness as a deterrent to gender integration has not only been challenged through empirical data on fitness levels of women but it has become less of an imperative in view of technological advances and changing nature of war fighting.

Third, evidence from literature on Western women in the military showed that including women in combat roles, in no way, affects unit cohesion. Studies suggests that women can enhance combat capabilities of the military from the squad to the joint staff without damaging unit cohesion. Cohesion is not just rooted in common traits such as race, ethnicity, or gender; rather, it is based on collective goals and objectives. Accordingly, small-unit cohesion is not impaired by the addition of women (Haring 2013). A study conducted by RAND, in 2010, posited that there was a tendency to focus on two distinct elements of unit cohesion: social cohesion and task cohesion. Social cohesion relates to the extent people like each other; task cohesion is the shared commitment group members have in meeting a goal (RAND Corp 2010). Evidence supports task cohesion as a far more important measure of unit performance than social cohesion. Some studies reveal that high social cohesion is linked to negative group behaviors. High social cohesion can produce groupthink and polarized attitudes leading to poor decision-making by the group. Studies of the Canadian military, a force gender integrated since the 1980s, further evidences that the presence

of women in combat does not in any way negatively impact operational performance or team cohesion (Cawkil et al. 2009).

Finally, the rationale for including (or excluding) women in combat operations is poorly laid out by the Indian army, often in contradiction to its overall goals. Compared to their peers in other countries, Indian women in the forces, currently only in officer ranks are excluded from participating on the frontlines. The new policy of inducting women in other ranks, that is, the military police (expected to reach force levels of 1700), is still a non-combatant role. While arguments for opening combat jobs to women in uniform are strong, the job itself is not free of challenges. Impediments to female performance in combat are likely to emerge in three core areas: training, infrastructure and morale, professionalism, and sexual harassment.

Impediments to Female Performance in Combat

Training, Infrastructure and Morale

Women serving in combat roles will face the same challenges as their male counterparts stemming from inter-related shortcomings in Training, Infrastructure, and Morale to a large extent. One exception could be, if women are not treated equally or face sexual harassment and discrimination, it is bound to affect their morale. A grave problem for the Indian military is the relative shortage of appropriate infrastructure, equipment and technology to effectively compete in today's war environment. However, this is largely gender neutral. The standoff with China in Doklam demonstrates the severity and magnitude of the problem. A 2015 report published in *The Hindustan Times* highlighted how the lack of proper roads and manpower in North-eastern states adversely affected the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), which patrols the border regions along China (Bisht 2015). The issue of infrastructure determines levels of defense preparedness. A well-trained military with the most sophisticated and advanced machinery will perform better on the battlefield. Without necessary equipment and infrastructure, morale of soldiers, both male and female, will be seriously undermined. The Comptroller and Auditor General in his 2013 Report alerted that 50 percent of the categories of weapons, including tanks and artillery guns, had stocks for less than ten days of fighting. While there was a marginal improvement, the army was able to boost stocks that can sustain it for ten days of conflict only (Kanwal 2017). In December 2020, the government authorized the armed forces to raise their weapons and ammunition reserves so as to be able to sustain 15 days of high-intensity conflict (NDTV 2020).

Professionalism

Women joining combat arms will be required to maintain the highest standards of professionalism. Women with families, who seek to return home frequently to serve their family obligations will need to consider the professional costs of doing so. If women want an equal share of the fight with men, then nothing short of a full commitment to the job will be acceptable. Women will need to

demonstrate this commitment and maintain a fair work-life balance, without which it will be much harder to convince their male counterparts in government and the military to take them seriously.

Sexual Harassment

Women in the armed forces and in particular, the Indian army reportedly face sexual harassment, although the universal culture of silencing, here as elsewhere, has made for very limited media exposure of such incidents. Also, the limited number of women in the forces and their induction at the officer level only (till recently), arguably has made the problem more manageable. However, the occasional media report of a sexual harassment incident is a stark reminder of a problem that hangs over the armed forces worldwide. In October 2023, Army authorities at Bareilly received a complaint from a woman officer alleging harassment by another officer. This was confirmed by Shantanu Pratap Singh, Joint Director Public Relations, Ministry of Defense, Lucknow, in charge of matters related to HQ Central Command (Chinna 2023). Further, there are multiple reports documenting sexual harassment and assault during the early years of Indian security forces' counterinsurgency operations in Kashmir and the Northeast of India (Human Rights Watch 1993; Manchanda 2004). With more women being inducted into the rank and file of the armed forces, the problem of sexual harassment within the forces is likely to become a major concern here as it has been in defense forces in other parts of the world.

Gendered hierarchies in India are deeply entrenched, erecting natural barriers for women seeking jobs in active combat. The problem, though, is not just exclusive to combat but rooted in Indian society where patriarchal norms are hard to break and women who succeed in breaking through are routinely subject to misogyny and harassment. Although Indian society is culturally evolving, women in powerful roles contradict traditional norms, deemed threatening to patriarchal men who believe that once women occupy such roles, they become harder to control. This pervasive unequal power dynamic is likely to plague the experience of Indian women in combat.

Conclusion

In conclusion, lessons on gender integration in the Indian military are mixed. While the three services have inducted women in command roles, opportunities to serve in combat arms, with the exception of the air force and navy, appear to be slim given the persisting resistance from serving and retired male officers. The learning curve is steep and social, political, and cultural challenges remain obstacles to women demanding equality in the military. As the Indian military modernizes, the role of women in the Indian military will continue to take center-stage but not without further reforms.

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