

## Women in combat role: an issue of gender sensitization and gender equality- a psychological interpretation

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### ABSTRACT

The best thermometer to the progress of the nation is its role, status and treatment of its women. In order to that the aim of this study is to analyze the issues involved in the Indian context on the induction of women as in combat role. Induction of women in Indian Army for combat roles is a desired step towards narrowing gender biases in armed forces. The study is also overviewed the perceptions of Indian society about the same especially followed by historical perspective, pros and cons in women induction and current scenario with psychological interpretation.

**Keywords:** *women in armed forces, combat role, gender sensitization, gender equality*

The role of women in the armed forces for a long time, was limited to the medical profession i.e. doctors and nurses. In 1992, the doors were thrown open for women entry as regular officers in aviation, logistics, law, engineering and executive cadres. The emergence of these women into totally male dominated bastions did initially create embarrassing moments for both. Currently, women in the non-medical cadre, serve as Short Service Commissioned (SSC) officers. Under this type of commission, they can serve in the armed forces for a period ranging from 5-14 years.

Transformation now is the buzzword in the Army, yet the issue of induction of women into combat roles is still steeped in controversy. Two different schools of thought do exist amongst the scholars. The first claim that women are equally capable of men to perform the job and it's the matter of equality also, whereas the supporters of latter idea claim that it is the exploitation of women to employ in combat because they are not physically and psychologically fit to perform the job. This debate needs to be carried out in detail.

Yes, women have been serving in the Indian armed forces for many decades. The Armed Forces Medical Services were the first to break this glass ceiling. The Indian Navy inducted women in non-combat roles commencing early 1990s. However, induction into combat roles has very different connotations, even among the services.

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To begin with the word combat deserves a closer look. Traditionally combat would mean direct hand-to hand human fight which involves deliberate offensive actions i.e. engaging an enemy while being exposed to direct enemy fire. In times of war, combat duties are duties requiring a person to personally commit an act of violence against the enemy. The 21st century military operations are conducted differently. There is an increased reliance on high-tech weaponry. With this dependency on technology, the uncertainty levels have dramatically reduced and the use of brute force has been relegated.

In 2016, three women were inducted in the Indian Air Force as fighter pilots on an experimental basis. A logical progression to this decision, women will now be inducted in the army for combat roles as well. This will make India one among the league of nations that have successfully inducted women in combat roles in their defense services, like Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Australia, Canada and Israel.

Currently women are given selective roles in medical, legal, educational and engineering wings in the Army. The process will begin with rendering military police roles to women which includes policing army establishments, maintaining the movement and logistics of army troops during both peace and war, handling prisoners acquired during wars and extending support to civil police force whenever required.

In regards with **Gender sensitization** means it presides over gender sensitivity, the modification of behavior by raising awareness of gender equality concerns many statements made by the military are misquoted due to lack of knowledge of its procedures among the civil society of India. If reports about inducting them as *jawans* (the term is not yet gender neutral) are to be believed, it will not only be a path breaking venture but quite an unusual step to be taken by the Indian Army.

### ***Issues involved (taken as a cons) in inducting women in the frontlines units in armed forces***

**The Nature of Army:** The Army necessarily differs from civil society. The military is not governed in accordance with principles of justice and liberalism that characterize the very society it defends. Behaviour that is acceptable, indeed even protected in civil society is prohibited in the military. The military restricts the freedom of movement of its member. It restricts speech, prohibits certain relationships between members, if the military fails, the society it protects may not survive. Hence two sets of values are on a collision course. Military and Civil. Equality and opportunity are noble ideals but they have no place in the battlefield where it is a question of living and dying. It is not about women's rights, equal opportunity, and career assignments for enhancement purposes for selection to higher work. It is about combat effectiveness, combat readiness, and so we are talking National Security".

Issues related to physical abilities: Women if granted commission in Infantry may be called upon to serve in combat zone sometime or the other, in her career. The most common reason for opposing women in combat is that they largely lack the physical strength to perform effectively in a combat environment. Studies conducted in the United States have observed that on average men are 40 percent stronger than women. Contrary to what some seem to believe, technology has not overcome the importance of physical strength in the Army. It is felt that when women cannot meet the requirements or rigours of a job.

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**Body Composition or Muscular Strength:** The West point and General Accounting Office (GAO) studies reveal that body composition (both physical and anatomic) favors men. Specifically, women experience more difficulty in lifting heavy loads, road marching, carrying loads, running and throwing than men do. Women generally require more time to perform these tasks. Additionally, they must perform at higher percentage of their physical abilities, leading to earlier fatigue. The reasons are that they have less muscle mass, more fat, which accumulates on buttocks, arms and thighs which lowers the center of gravity offering more resistance when running. They have less bone mass, wider pelvic structure and lower aerobic capacity than men.

**Injuries:** Research findings have indicated a high risk for injuries during Army basic combat training. During training, 51% of women and 27% of men were injured which was related to a lower level of fitness when compared to men and resulted in an average time loss of 13 days training. During this study, women participated in an integrated conditioning programme and completed extensive road marches wearing combat boots. Incidence of injury was related to greater body weight and body fat and limited leg strength.

**Pregnancy & Premenstrual Syndrome:** It is a major female health issue, which contributes to major attrition among women in the Army. Pregnancy can also halt deployment of the woman in the unit. During pregnancy, women's duties are often severely curtailed. This curtailment typically includes: no field duty, limited physical training, limited standing at attention. Many women experience severe premenstrual syndromes. This problem can be potentially dysfunctional for units with many lady officers. This is especially true if there is an involuntary tendency for women living in close quarters to synchronize their menstrual cycles. Pregnancy can affect the deployability of a unit when the unit has a disproportionate number of women or is understaffed.

**Abuse by Enemy:** Men and women are at risk of torture in case of getting captured by the enemy. Both male and female prisoners are at risk of torture and rape, but misogynistic societies may be more willing to abuse women prisoners, women are more vulnerable to this torture. In today's world human dignity is frequently compromised on grounds of sex. Many women find themselves treated unequally in respect of employment, physical safety and integrity. In many cases discrimination is caused by their being women and in some other cases institutions construct or perpetuate inequality.

**Arrangements & Accommodations:** The intangible and hygiene factors issues involving women is the final and all-important concern. In all debates, the physiological and biological needs, issues of spouse posting and the like get highlighted as the prime problems. This is not the same as placing women of other ranks too in crowded mess decks and bathrooms – so far built only to accommodate males. While arrangements to accommodate a small number of women officers are possible, by tweaking the design of ships under construction, it would deplete the combat capability of warships if precious space is allocated just to segregate men and women of other ranks as well.

**Tradition:** Traditional cultures contain their own norms of what a woman's life should be. These are mainly norms of female modesty, deference, obedience and self-sacrifice. There is a general belief that women who claim equality are merely aping a Western agenda, which is against the norms of their local culture; Western because they involve an emphasis on choice and opportunity. Men, especially those likely to enlist, maintain traditional gender roles.

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Harassment and resentment of the presence of women in a hyper-masculine military subculture would likely become a problem.

### ***Pros of Women in Combat Role***

The move is logical and has strong reasoning to back it up. As long as a person fits the profile, gender becomes arbitrary. With modern physical training techniques, physical capabilities no longer remain an issue. In the modern technological battlefields, technical expertise and decision-making skills are becoming more important than just brute force. Some points are mentioned below-

**Gender is not a hindrance:** As long as an applicant is qualified for a position, one's gender is arbitrary. It is easy to recruit and deploy women who are in better shape than many men sent into combat. Women in Army advocates argue that the average woman is pregnant for a very small portion of her productive life. They argue that data are inconclusive about pain and discomfort of menstruation.

**Military Readiness:** Allowing a mixed gender force keeps the military strong. The armed forces are severely troubled by falling retention and recruitment rates. This can be addressed by allowing women in the combat role. The army must have also carried out a detailed study on the socio-economic factors that impinge on inducting women soldiers. A woman officer is protected to a large extent by the powers vested in her by virtue of her rank.

**Effectiveness:** The military's records show that male troops average more time lost due to drunkenness, going AWOL, and other infractions of discipline than women do. Overall a female soldier is more likely to be fit and productive than a male one, even when pregnancy rates are taken into account. Any combat unit depends on its 'team spirit' to maintain its effectiveness.

**Tradition:** Top-down decision making is not always successful, particularly if the ground level social prejudices that exist in the rural and semi-urban areas are not fully understood. Molestations and invading the privacy of women, male chauvinism and predominantly patriarchal societies cannot be wished away, even by the so-called advanced societies in the West. The blanket restriction for women limits the ability of commanders in theater to pick the most capable person for the job. Training will be required to facilitate the integration of women into combat units. Cultures change over time and the masculine subculture can evolve too.

**Cultural Differences & Demographics:** Culture has always been a seat of debate and contestation. In any culture it would be unfair to say that women are striving for equal opportunities, under the influence of any Western/ alien agency. Clearly women prefer equality as it gives them a richer sense of their self, of their possibilities and equal worth. What is indeed western about this argument is the arrogant presumption that choice and economic agency are solely for men. Allowing women into other units of the armed forces did not compromise culture, so there is no basis for the presumption that the introduction of women into combat units will in any way corrupt culture. Women are more effective in some circumstances than men. Allowing women to serve doubles the talent pool for delicate and sensitive jobs that require interpersonal skills.

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**Current Scenario in Security Forces: Need for Gender Equality :-** The Committee of empowerment of women, constituted way back in 1996, has been consistently pressing upon successive governments to enhance the representation of women in the forces. In 2009 and 2012, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) issued advisories to raise the representation of women in state police and central paramilitary police forces to 33%. Subsequently in January 2016, Union Home Minister, Rajnath Singh approved 33% of posts at the Constable level to be filled by women in CRPF and CISF. 14-15% posts at constable level were reserved for women in border guarding forces such as BSF, SSB and ITBP. In March 2015, the central government approved induction of women in Delhi Police for 33% of posts; the same was extended to 6 Union territories as well for the posts of Police constables to sub-inspectors. States like Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Assam, and Tamil Nadu have reservation for women, but the number still is uneven across states. As on January 2016, out of 22.80 lakhs total police force (states) in the country, actual strength of women police was only 122912. It's barely 7.10% of the total strength. As per the recommendation of the Committee on Empowerment of women's Sixth Report, only 14 States/UT's implemented 33% reservation for women and 7 states had no reservation yet. Remaining States/UT's had between 3% to 20% reservation.

Indian army began inducting women in 1992 into the officer cadre, whereas the Indian Air Force (IAF) agreed in principle only in 2015 to induct women pilots in combat roles. In April 2016, Indian Navy announced permanent commission for women completing seven years of service. Till then, apart from the Navy, all the other wings of the armed forces had permanent commission for women.

In spite of the various affirmative actions initiated, women remain drastically under-represented. Law enforcement is one of the least gender-diverse of all the public sector jobs in India. Women still haven't found an easy place. Even the most basic and preliminary questions about this disparity remains not only unanswered but unasked. In India the gender disparity among forces is deeply rooted in certain economic and social factors. There is a traditional preference for boys over girls at birth itself.

Women are now taking up combat roles in Indian Air Force with Avani Chaturvedi, Mohana Singh Jitarwal, and Bhawana Kanth being the first 3 women fighter pilots Marking International Women's Day on 8 March 8, 2020 all 3 fighter pilots were awarded Nari Shakti Puraskar. Besides this, The Indian Army has its first Woman General. She is Miss G. A. Ram. Promoted to the rank of General, she heads the Directorate of Nursing service. Now India has become the third country in the world to have women as a General. So far only the Americans and the French armies had this distinction.

### ***Psychological Interpretation- A Way Forward***

Due to whatever physiological or sociological reasons, society at large evolved a role for the women in professions of nurture and culture rather than soldiering.

Equality in the armed forces is a little different because the argument here is not about rights; it is about having a duty, an obligation towards one's country. In this world of technological warfare the actual question is of capabilities, about intelligent training and self-discipline. Equality never advocates special treatment. Induction should be regardless of gender. Selecting those who are best suited for their jobs is the basis for the capabilities approach to the question of equality.

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We should take these points as a matter of considerations- **Firstly**, the physical standards expected of the men and women must be the same. If the men are required to carry out a march of 45 kilometres with their gear, so should the women. Combat does not distinguish men from women. **Secondly**, the entire training period for permanent commissioned officers should be applicable to women as well. **Thirdly**, warships and indeed combat units work on fixed manpower strengths, which cater for temporary duties and leave relief. Since women officers are likely to be away for relatively longer durations, for their legitimate physical needs, the unit strength should be compensated to a level of 1:1.3 so that at no time is a combat unit under-manned.

Finally, when comparing ourselves with the countries of the West, we need to bear in mind that the demographic dividend and employment opportunities can be suitably tailored by inducting young men into combat roles while also providing excellent opportunities for women in equally important non-combat roles. Unemployed youth of the masculine gender would be much more destructive than their female counterparts, as has been witnessed in many parts of the world.

### CONCLUSION

“It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing.”- stated by **Swami Vivekanand**. Free human beings have a dignity that deserves respect from legal and social institutions. The idea of human dignity usually involves an idea of equal worth: rich and poor; urban and rural; male and female are equally deserving of respect just by virtue of being human. This respect should not be compromised on any characteristic especially those dictated by the whims of nature.

War is no longer a predominantly male activity. To be optimally effective, the forces require the best of men and women. Women may or may not be best suited to discharge traditional roles, but the point of contention is that it should be their choice. She should not play a role by default but by choice. Any law, tradition or institution should not cloud her horizons. As a free human being, she should be able to soar as high as she pleases to. All she needs is the freedom and dignity of choice.

But with changing gender narratives around the world about what women are “capable” of doing, this move proves that India is ready to put its faith in the “**Shakti**”, not only in letter but in the spirit. The time is not far when we may use the term ‘sisters-in-arms’ as equivalent to ‘brothers-in-arms’.

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