

Women's Expanding Presence in the Indian Armed Forces: Beyond Traditional Roles and Future Challenges

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Abstract: The Indian Armed Forces have a rich history, but the inclusion of women has been a gradual process. This paper delves into the historical trajectory of women's roles in the Indian military since independent India, from their initial contributions in healthcare & medical services to their present-day participation in various support branches. A historical examination of the evolving role of women in the Indian military, tracing their journey from ancillary support roles to combat positions. It explores the challenges and triumphs faced by women as they navigated a traditionally male-dominated domain. Additionally, the paper analyzes the policies and societal attitudes like physiological and psychological factors that influence their participation in the Indian Armed Forces. By examining past milestones and present barriers, this paper aims to shed light on the ongoing evolution of gender dynamics within one of the world's largest military forces.

Keywords: Women in Armed forces, Indian Army, Indian Navy, Indian Air Force, Indian Coast Guard, Gender studies in defence forces, Short Service Commission (SSC), Permanent Commission (PC), Combat zone, Physiological, Psychological, Sociological.

Introduction

The process of transforming any organization or societal structure that views women as being subordinate to men is known as women's empowerment. Thus, to put it simply, women's empowerment is the process by which women gain the capacity to exercise their rights in a society with regard to their own lives and realize their sense of self-worth, their freedom to choose, their access to opportunities and resources, and their ability to shape social change to create a more equitable social and economic order by participating in local, national, and international decision-making processes.

Global leaders endorsed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, with the goal of integrating gender equality and women's empowerment into each of the 17 goals. Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls in all forms is the goal of Sustainable Development Goal Number 5, along with its targets.

There is barely a field in the modern world that women have not conquered. Nowadays, women have more social, legal, and political rights than they had in the past. Apart from managing household chores, women hold senior positions in many organizations, and we can witness participation of them in the political sector too.

Women can compete with and even surpass their male counterparts in a variety of fields, including politics, education, administration, and the medical field. Although the fact that Article 16 of the Indian Constitution mandates equal opportunities irrespective of gender, still the sectors like India's military forces remain predominantly male-dominated.

Research Objectives

The present study has following objectives:

- To map the evolution of women into armed forces of India.
- To analyse the contribution of women personnel and their statistical composition of women in Indian Army, Indian Navy, Indian Air Force, and Indian Coast Guard.
- To analyse various societal and cultural attitudes, physiological and psychological factors, challenges and debate hindering inclusion of women into combat roles.

Research Methodology: The study employs both descriptive and analytical research methods. Primary data is obtained through official military briefings whereas secondary sources include government report, defence think tank publication, and academic journal publications.

Armed Forces and Women

People have long believed that men alone should be responsible for national security and borders. Wars and other forms of fighting in the past were typically seen as masculine activities, relying on attributes like physical power and bravery. However, women have been tagged as weak and vulnerable. Historically, women did not fight wars directly. Therefore, women who join the military are confronted with a male-oriented culture. Women make up a very small percentage of the military establishment and suffer various forms of discrimination within it. Perceptions that this is only a man's world, fixed career tracks or exclusion from certain job categories are all obstacles to gender equality in the army. Thus, sexual harassment among members of the armed forces is so common that these practices can prosper under their existing internal cultures. Some laws still reflect none of the spirit contained in the constitution and gender bias has turned out to be rife throughout workplaces especially in the armed forces (Lama and Paul 2020).

In USA the women have been serving in armed forces since 1901, with the roles limited to cooks and nurses. However, there was increased participation during the time of world wars and Vietnam war. The turning page was in 1941 when Women's Army Corps was formed (Lakritz 2019). There was women's participation in Air, Ground, and Services forces but the combat role was opened only in 2015 (Gittleman 2018).

In Israel the women are serving in Israel Defence Forces since 1948. The combat role was opened up in 1995 with the ruling of High Court of Justice. Between 2012 and 2016, there was a notable advancement in gender parity in combat roles, as the proportion of female personnel rose from 3% to 7%.

In Australia 92% of jobs in Australian Defence were opened for women. It has recently seen a rise in the number of women serving in combat roles. According to a former junior defense official, there are unfilled positions for women, particularly in special unit formations that combat the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Women in Indian Armed forces

The Indian armed forces comprising of Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard under the Ministry of Defense (MoD).



The timeline for the various women related entries, acts and ruling by Indian government:
Pre- Independence:

- In 1888 Military Nursing Service (MNS) was formed with enrolment of 10 British nurses, establishing military nursing services in India. However it was in 1914 that Indian women were enrolled and attached to MNS.
- In 1926 MNS was formally established as permanent nursing service for Indian troops. Later in 1943 MNS officers granted Commissioned Officer status to MNS and formally integrated into the Indian Army.

Post Independence:

- In 1950, The Army Act, made women ineligible for regular commissions with certain exceptions specified by the central government.
- In November 1958, the Army Medical Corps became the first Indian Army unit to award regular commissions to women.
- In 1992, Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs approved the induction of women officers into the Indian Army through the Women Special Entry Scheme (WSES) started, after the approval of the
- In February 2019, the government granted a permanent commission to women officers in eight streams of the Army, in addition to the Judge Advocate General (JAG) and Army Education Corps (AEC), which it was granted earlier in 2008, according to Wion .
- As of 2023, women are not eligible for service as combat troops in specialist forces such as the Parachute Regiment, but they can join some of its non-combat wings like the signal corps, engineers, etc.
- In a landmark ruling in February 2020, the Supreme Court directed the government to ensure that women SSC officers are granted permanent commission to women SSC officers, subject to their obtaining 60 per cent marks in the assessment subjects, being found medical fit, and having received disciplinary and vigilance clearances. The directives are currently being implemented by the government and military forces which allows more female colonels and lieutenant generals in the Army (Devulapalli, 2020; News18, 2023).
- Another landmark inclusion of women into National Defence Academy (NDA) with 17 women cadets passing out in May 2025 and 15 in November 2025.

Present entries for women: Progressive Advancements

In the **Army**, women are commissioned in the Engineers, Corps of Signals, Army Service Corps (ASC), Army Ordnance Corps (AOC), Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (EME), Army Education Corps (AEC), Intelligence Corps and Judge Advocate General (JAG). Women are granted Permanent Commission in 12 Arms and Services, in addition to Army Medical Corps, Army Dental Corps, and Military Nursing Service.

In the **Navy**, women are commissioned in the Law Cadre, ATC, Logistics Cadre and Education Branch. Women are excluded from the Executive Branch though Law, ATC and Logistics do form part of the Executive Branch; they are not the executive paths to a command. Women are also excluded from the Engineering Branch, the Electrical Branch, Naval Aviation, Submarines and Diving. Earlier women have only served aboard ships on trial basis but now women are deployed onboard warships in afloat appointments and are also appointed as Pilots and Naval Air Operations (NAO) officers except submarines. Indian Naval Academy has opened its door for induction of women through 10+2 B.Tech entry scheme from January 2024.

In the Air Force, women are commissioned in the Flying Branch as transport and helicopter pilots, in the Technical Branch as Aeronautical Engineers (Electrical) and (Mechanical), in the Ground Duty Branches i.e. Administrative and Logistics, Accounts, Education and Meteorological. A few courses of women were inducted in the Air Traffic Controller (ATC)/ Fighter Controller Branch, but this has since been stopped. Women in the Flying Branch can only fly transport aircraft, namely, Avro and AN 32 and only Chetak and Cheetah helicopters and that too not within 1.5 km range of the international border.

In **Indian Coast Guard**, women are recruited for General Duty as Pilot and law officers. Since its establishment, the Coast Guard is the only unit under the Ministry of Defense to offer women permanent commissions. The force had previously recruited women in all fields but front-line guard. In order to police India's large and critical maritime zone, the Indian Coast Guard became the first unit under the Ministry of Defence to deploy female officers in combat duties in 2017 (Dubey, 2017).

Women Representation in Three Armed forces: What does Statistics say?

As per the Press Information Bureau in 2023 the following data was provided by the government, the respective strength of women in all three-armed forces is given below in Table 1, 2, and 3.

Indian Army:

Table 1

Sr. No	Category	Held Strength of women (as on Jan. 01 ,2023)
1.	Women Officers (Excluding Army Medical Corps, Army Dental Corps)	1,733
2.	Junior Commissioned Officers (JCO's)	00
3.	Other Ranks	100

Indian Air Force:

Table 2

Sr. No.	Category	Held Strength of women (as on July 01,2023)
1.	Women Officers (Excluding medical and dental branch)	1,654
2.	Airmen (Agniveervayu)	155

Indian Navy:

Table 3

Sr. No.	Category	Held Strength of women (as on July 26 ,2023)
1.	Women Officers (Excluding medical and dental branch)	580
2.	Sailors (Agniveer)	726

Medical and Dental Branches: Total Number of women (Cadre-wise & Service-wise) in Armed Forces Medical Services (AFMS) are as under (as on July 01, 2023) in Table 4.

Table 4

Service Corps	Army	Navy	Air Force
Army Medical Corps (AMC)	1,212	151	274
Army Dental Corps (ADC)	168	10	05
Military Nursing Service (MNS)	3,841	380	425

As per the latest data the total number of women in armed forces has reached up to 11000 (Press Information Bureau, 2026).

Societal Perceptions and Cultural Shifts

In most countries that have formally accepted women in their defence forces, women are excluded from this primary mission of combat. Even though women have been serving in India's armed forces for almost two decades, their employment options are limited to support arms and services. There exist several factors that contribute to the segregation of women in support functions. The

sociological factors include the belief that there are inherent emotional differences between the sexes, which is reflected in the culture and operations of the armed forces, the costs associated with providing separate facilities and infrastructure for women; and finally, the economic factors stemming from the fact that the armed forces of any given country are composed of members of that society.

Sociologically we have been taught to believe that sexual division of labour existed among our ancestors, in which hunting was the sole responsibility of men and women are said to have focused on giving birth and nurturing of children. However recent archaeological discoveries have caused a paradigm shift with the discovery of 9000-year-old Wilamaya Patjxa site in Peru. A burial which was initially assumed to belong to male hunter was later identified as female containing hunting toolkit. The analysis of similar burials across America have shown a consistent pattern of women in grave with hunting equipment. Such discovery has ignited the need for re-assessment of historical and evolutionary narratives (Sengupta, 2026).

Physiological Factors: Physiological factors justify the exclusion of women from combat specializations since it is a well-established fact that women are weaker than men (Bakshi, 2006). Soldiers must maintain high levels of physical fitness in order to accomplish their jobs as best they can due to the physically demanding nature of military duty. When competing against men, women are physiologically disadvantaged because they have less muscular mass, more body fat, lower haemoglobin levels, fewer red blood cells, and smaller cardiac outputs. Compared to men, women are weaker, slower, and more vulnerable to skeletal damage from exercise. Compared to men, fewer women are qualified for physically hard employment. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink or modify the activities (different pace, mechanical aids, cooperation) in order to integrate women into physically demanding military-oriented employment. Although women can become more physically fit through training, gender differences cannot be entirely eradicated by training (Libster et al., 1999).

There is a dearth of female-focused sports and games in India, and most women are neither encouraged nor given the chance to engage in any kind of sports. Their muscles and endurance are therefore still undeveloped and have limited room for growth. The idea that males are all equally strong is also false. It is necessary to assess each person's strength and endurance individually. They are dependent on personal ability rather than gender. Not all men are fit for combat duties and some women are.

Besides this another socio-physiological notion is female physical condition of pregnancy, childbirth and rearing. Pregnancy and associated obligations are seen to cause women to neglect their responsibilities by taking up excessive amounts of time and attention. Commanders are faced with difficulties as a result, as they must create backup plans and reallocate staff to cover the loss. However, women's ability to become pregnant is hardly a good enough excuse to keep them out of challenging roles like combat. Small families are the norm in today's progressive society, and requests for maternity leave are not as common. Having a family is just another physical issue that can make someone temporarily unfit, and women can and do return to their previous levels of employment and fitness.

Psychological Factors : Women are thought to be unfit for warfare due to a number of psychological differences between men and women, including a supposed lack of the aggressiveness and fighting spirit necessary to win conflicts. All troops, male or female, have an innate instinct to protect themselves during combat. Thus, it is at best a very controversial question to decide whether violent behavior is influenced by biology, social training, or tradition. No woman can deny the subtle or overt conditioning she receives to conform to the female ideal of a passive, nurturing and submissive individual.

Tarrasch et al. (2011) in their study found that compared to male soldiers, female soldiers in both combat and non-combat units showed higher levels of stress. In several of the psychological tests,

female troops in combat roles compared more favorably to their male colleagues than to female non-combat soldiers, but they reported feeling "more commitment and challenge." Compared to non-combat women, combat women requested greater medical attention.

Challenges and Debates

In a study to identify issues with both genders cooperating at work, a sample survey of 600 was carried out taking into account seniors, juniors, peers, subordinates, academicians, women officers, and parents as part of study project between 2001 and 2003. There was a noticeable conflict in values and viewpoints between the sexes, with distorted perceptions. For most soldiers, having women in the military meant that physical standards would be lowered, work culture norms would be changed to accommodate women, a soldier's ego and freedom would be restricted, hierarchies would fall apart, tensions would arise from courtships, jealousies, and favouritism, and unenforced codes of conduct would cause resentment and sex scandals (Randhawa, 2005). In her work Bakhshi (2006) interviewed defence personnel across gender and service in which majority ruled out the inclusion of women into combat. The work environment of army and civil domain work entirely different. Justice and liberalism are not the guiding ideals of the military. Its morals and standards of behaviour are diametrically opposed to those of the people they protect from harm. For example, the army restricts one's freedom of movement, expression, and interactions with other officers (fraternization). The army's objective is military efficacy, not unity (Bhattacharyya, 2012). American Marine Corps General Robert Barrowre marked in Senate hearing, "... 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" (Goldman, 1973).

Conclusion: Taking into account all of these factors, we cannot deny the reality of a changing battlefield, a perception of security, and the ability of women in contemporary conflict, where mental toughness is valued over physical prowess and stress management is the primary tactic. Scientific research has demonstrated that women are more resilient mentally and can tolerate stress better than men. This is not meant to diminish a woman's physical prowess. While there are many problems that can never be solved, attitudes of welcome and perception can have a lasting impact. The requirements of military performance and national security must be firmly based in reality and cannot be influenced by attitudes or presumptions. Combat deployments ought to be reserved for ability, not gender. All specialties ought to be accessible to those who are skilled, qualified, and competent to pursue them on a gender-neutral basis.

Women have come a long way to reach newer heights in the Armed forces especially from supporting arms to frontline. Without a question, women have performed on par with males. For all round growth and development of the country, the Indian government has been continuously working to elevate women in society. From the very beginning of the military forces, women have been trained. The government's attempt to achieve gender parity guaranteed in the Indian constitution is seen in the admission of girls to Sainik Schools, which were once designed primarily for boys and train future defense officials. Positively, the proportion of women serving in the Indian Armed Forces has increased significantly, while there are still significant disparities when compared to the male population. Women empowerment in armed forces needs to be reflected at ground level especially in statistics than mere celebrating women role as contingent commander on Republic Day parade.

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