



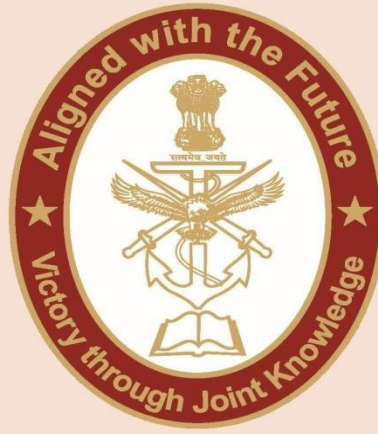
CENJOWS

WEB ARTICLE
WA/35/25

WOMEN IN COMBAT ROLES: EVALUATING INDIA'S PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES

MS SHARMISTHA PRATAP

CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

**Women in Combat Roles:
Evaluating India's Progress
and Challenges**



**Ms. Sharmistha Pratap is an intern
at CENJOWS**

Background

Since the medieval period, women have been contributing to wars in their own way. Rather than physical combat or in hospitals, women have given their fair share of contributing in wars. In some cases, women have also fought wars without the knowledge of men and won. Women serve in army, navy as well as Airforce when it comes to serving in combat. There is a need for supporting women to serve in these sectors as it can give great results regarding the capabilities of women.

Throughout the 20th century, women began to take on more formalized roles within military structures and during World War II, women served in auxiliary positions, and some engaged directly in combat.ⁱ The integration of women into more active combat roles gained momentum in the late 20th century, particularly with the lifting of bans on their participation in direct ground combat.ⁱⁱ The shift of women into combat roles happened because of three main reasons which were the need for more soldiers during wars, strong support from

feminists, and changes in government policies. This was a big step forward, but the journey is not over yet. People are still debating whether men and women get equal treatment in the military, how this affects the strength of the army, and what changes are still needed. Even though a lot of progress has been made, there's still more work to do to make sure women have the same opportunities and respect in the military.

The involvement of women in the Indian Armed Forces can be traced back to 1888 with the establishment of the "Indian Military Nursing Service".ⁱⁱⁱ The creation of the Women's Auxiliary Corps further increased the scope of women's participation in the military, allowing them to serve in non-combat roles such as communications, accounting, administration, and more.^{iv} The first time women joined the military was really important because it opened the door for them to take on more roles in the armed forces. Even though they were still limited in what they could do, this was a big step toward giving them a proper place in the military. After 1947, women mostly worked in the military as doctors, nurses, and in office jobs. For a long time, the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force did not allow them to take part in direct combat. The rules were very strict, and women had limited roles. It was only in the late 1900s that things started to change, and they slowly began to get more opportunities in the armed forces. On the 17th of February 2020, the Supreme Court of India made a groundbreaking decision that would forever change the landscape of the Indian Armed Forces.^v The court ruled in favor of granting permanent commissions (PC) to women serving under Short Service Commission (SSC), putting them on equal footing with their male counterparts.^{vi} Women in the Indian Armed Forces could only serve for 10 to 14 years under the Short Service Commission (SSC). Unlike men, they weren't allowed a Permanent Commission (PC), which meant no long-term job security, pension, or chances to lead. Thanks to this ruling, women officers can now have long-term careers and even aim for leadership positions. But there is still a long way to go. Even though the rules have changed, many challenges remain, like old mindsets and difficulties in fully including women in all roles.

Stereotypes Regarding Women in Combat Roles

Nearly 7,000 female officers are currently serving in India's Army, and over 1,600 in the Air Force, according to the latest government figures released in 2023.^{vii} Feminist scholar Sandra Whitworth argues that in order to enable conscripts to survive the tough conditions of military life and to be able to kill without guilt, military training focuses on tearing down their old

connections and creating new bonds of brotherhood and camaraderie between them based on militarized masculinity.^{viii} Whitworth criticizes how military training has traditionally used gender roles to shape soldiers. While discipline, teamwork, and toughness are important, making masculinity a core part of soldiering can lead to long-term mental and social problems. But things are changing. Many armies today focus more on mental well-being, gender equality, and making better decisions in tough situations. The idea of a "tough, emotionless soldier" is evolving, with more focus on teamwork, emotional intelligence, and ethical leadership.

Sneha Susan Itty, a Major in the Indian army, had an interview with the Hindustan Times in 2015 said "The training killed all my femininity, I was serving while I was pregnant and not for a day was, I given any relaxation, nor did I ask for it."^{ix} Major Itty's words show the hard work and determination needed to serve in the military. But they also highlight how women in the armed forces often face strict and sometimes unfair expectations that can make their journey even tougher.

Former lieutenant general Kanitkar stressed there are cautious and firm steps being taken when it comes to inducting women in combat roles, "One thing is putting women in combat roles for tokenism, and the other is whether there is a real need for it. At the moment, we have enough people in the combat roles," she said and further added that "In a tank where there are just three people in a very small space, how would women get their privacy? It is good to take those steps in a guarded manner,".^x This brings up an important question: Should women be included in combat just to be fair, or should it depend on what the military actually needs? This shows the old belief that the military was made mainly for men, and now changes are needed to make it work better for both men and women. Instead of asking if women should be in combat, we should talk about how to include them properly as some challenges shouldn't slow things down. "There were more men around me than women, but I never had a problem leading such teams as a woman. Nor did I have problems when I took administrative posts even in field areas," she said.^{xi} This part of her statement proves that it's not true that men have problems with women leaders in the military.

"I was interacting with commanders across my area of responsibility and I never felt any kind of discomfort from my side or from them. They looked at my professionalism. I think it's competence which matters," Kanitkar explained.^{xii} Even though her story is inspiring, not all

women have the same experience. Many might still face problems in the system. Lt. Gen. Kanitkar's words are inspiring, especially for young girls who want to join the armed forces. They show that hard work and skill matter more than gender. But her success also shows how much effort and support it takes to break old stereotypes.

Employment of women in combat forces has become a paramount issue in the present day, there are two schools of thoughts emerging, the first professing that women officers are on a par with the male officers while performing the job on the other hand, the supporters of latter claim that it is the exploitation of women to deploy them in combat areas since they are not physically and psychologically fit to perform the job.^{xiii} Letting women join combat roles shouldn't be seen as exploitation and rather opportunity. It should be seen as giving them more chances, if they choose it on their own, meet the same tough standards as men, and get the right training, support, and safety to do their job with respect. At the same time, the military should work on solving real problems like better facilities and creating a respectful and professional environment for everyone, including women.

Policies and Initiatives for Women Under Defense

Indian army has been motivating women to join the army by introducing different policies and initiatives. Indian Army Permanent Commission (PC) is being granted to Women Officers (WOs) in 12 Arms & Services (in addition to Army Medical Corps, Army Dental Corps and Military Nursing Service) where they are commissioned and Indian Army has ensured parity amongst WOs and their male counterparts with a complete gender-neutral environment existing in the 12 Arms/ Services they are presently serving in.^{xiv} A special board to screen all affected WOs has been held and the results have been declassified and in regular boards also, WOs are being considered for grant of PC along with their male counterparts.^{xv} Giving Permanent Commission to women officers is a really good and much-needed step toward fairness in the Indian Armed Forces. It's not just something the law asks for—it's the right thing to do. Women have always shown they can do their jobs well, and this policy shows that what truly matters is talent and hard work, not gender. Making a special screening board and including women in regular promotion boards shows that the system is trying to be fairer and more honest. Also, sharing the results openly helps build trust among women officers and makes them feel more confident that the system supports them.

Armed Forces have opened entry for women candidates in National Defence Academy (NDA)

with 19 cadets including 10 for Indian Army joining the academy every six months.^{xvi} First, Second and Third batch of women cadets started training in NDA with effect from July 2022, January 2023 and July 2023 respectively.^{xvii} Letting women join the NDA is a big and important step toward giving them equal chances in the Indian Armed Forces. It shows that women are no longer just seen as support members, but as future leaders too. But for this to really work, it's important that women cadets are treated fairly from the beginning, not judged or held back because of stereotypes. They should get the same training, chances to grow in their careers, and opportunities to take up leadership and combat roles just like the men.

Indian Navy

Sub Lieutenant Anamika B Rajeev's ascent to becoming the Indian Navy's first woman helicopter pilot is a testament to her perseverance and to the Navy's commitment to equality.^{xviii} Her success is a big moment in India's defense history. It shows that when women are given the same chances, they can do really well even in tough jobs like flying and combat. Her achievement is inspiring for young girls and also shows that the Navy is trying to be fairer. In 2022, the Indian Naval Air Squadron 314 made headlines with its first all-women independent maritime reconnaissance mission in the North Arabian Sea.^{xix} This mission not only showcased women's growing role in naval aviation but also highlighted the Navy's recognition of their capability to lead complex, independent operations.^{xx} The fact that the mission was "independent" shows that the Navy really trusted the skills, training, and leadership of women officers. They weren't just given support roles, they were also given important frontline duties, where they had to make tough decisions, keep watch, and handle serious situations at sea. This shows how capable and strong women officers really are. To keep this progress going, the Indian Navy needs to send women on important missions more often, not just once in a while to make a point. They should also help more women grow into leadership roles in every part of the Navy. At the same time, it's important to fix any rules or attitudes that still make it hard for women to feel fully included and respected in every unit. As a part of the Agnipath Scheme, women have been enrolled as Agniveers commencing from the first batch itself and they are subjected to the same training curriculum, professional courses and retention criteria as compared to their male counterparts.^{xxi} The Scheme is a big change in how people are recruited into the military, and including women in it makes their journey part of this new beginning. It shows that women are not just special cases and that

they are equal and important members of India's future armed forces, ready to serve and protect the country just like men.

Indian Air Force

In 1991, the Indian Armed Forces were opened for the first time to women, to serve as officers in branches other than medical.^{xxii} That moment opened the door for more progress, and today we see women as fighter pilots, leading ships, joining through the NDA, and taking part in important support roles during combat.

'DISHA' cell at Air HQ conducts various Induction Publicity programmes across the country related to induction/ career of officer cadre in IAF and women candidates are encouraged during such publicity drives to join IAF as a preferred career option.^{xxiii} Conduct of motivational talks by women officers gives opportunity to female students to interact with them and clear their apprehensions.^{xxiv} The 'DISHA' Cell is doing a great job by encouraging girls to join the Indian Air Force. It shows that the IAF isn't just letting women in, but is also helping them feel confident and excited about this career. In a society where the military is usually seen as a man's job, seeing women officers speak, guide, and inspire really makes a difference. It sends a strong message to young girls that they can join the forces and can do as much as anyone else.

Comparative Study

United States: Some countries like United States have gradually expanded the roles women can serve in, including combat roles, while others have more restrictive policies. Articles 14,15,16 and 19 of the Indian constitution uphold the values of equality and allow equal, non-discriminatory opportunities at work.^{xxv} When we look at countries like the United States, we see how modern democracies have given women more chances to take up important roles in the army, including combat and leadership. This shows real progress. On the other hand, some countries still don't allow women to do much in the military because of orthodox mentality, strict rules, or political reasons. This holds them back from moving forward and using the full strength of their people.

Israel: The Israeli Army or established as the “Israel Defense Forces” (Hereinafter referred to as IDF) is one of the few forces that has mandatory military service for all (male and female gender).^{xxvi} The Defense Duty Law (hereinafter referred to as “DDL”) is established in 1947, making army service mandatory for women.^{xxvii} Military duty was thirty months and eighteen months for respectively for male and female soldiers at the time this rule was written but women have the option to request to be removed from the army on religious or faith-related grounds, according to the service rules of the defence.^{xxviii} Israel has been including women in the army since 1947, which is way ahead of many countries. This shows that they’ve always believed women can play a strong role in protecting the country. While other nations are just starting to give women a chance in combat and leadership, Israel has been doing it for decades. While this is good but some rules, like shorter service time for women and religious exemptions, show that they are still balancing tradition, religion, and fairness. Even with these challenges, Israel’s example shows that if there is proper support from the government, military, and society, women can do really well in national defense.

Germany: From 2001, women in Germany were recruited combat roles, and there is no gender discrimination in the armed forces and the country opened its combat units to women, significantly increasing the recruitment of female soldiers.^{xxix} The number of women serving in the German armed forces is now three times higher than in 2001, about 800 female soldiers served in combat units in 2009.^{xxx} The latter shows a great example for other countries that are still thinking about whether women should be in combat roles. It proves that when women get proper training, good facilities, and support, they can do really well in tough military jobs. Germany’s progress also breaks the old belief that only men are strong or mentally tough enough for the army. With fair rules and the right attitude, women can be just as good as men in protecting the country and being strong leaders in the armed forces.

Conclusion

The role of women in the army is changing all around the world, including in India. This shows that people are starting to understand how strong, smart, and brave women can be in protecting their country. Countries like the US, Israel, and Germany have shown that if women are given the same chances, good training, and support, they can do really well in combat roles.

India is also making good progress with new rules and opportunities for women in the military. But we still need to change how some people think and fix problems inside the system. Giving women a fair chance in the armed forces not only makes things equal but also makes our country stronger and safer.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

References

ⁱ Team, Editorial. "Empowering Progress: Women in Combat Positions Today - Total Military Insight." The Insurance Universe, August 6, 2024. <https://totalmilitaryinsight.com/women-in-combat-positions/>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Women in the Indian Armed Forces - history, roles, Challenges & Achievements. Accessed April 3, 2025. <https://testbook.com/articles/women-in-the-indian-armed-forces>.

^{iv} Ibid

^v Ibid

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Vaid, Dharvi. "What Is the Role of Women in India's Military? – DW – 01/30/2025." dw.com, February 1, 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/india-role-of-women-military-2025/a-71455719>.

^{viii} Das, Shreshtha. "Equal Roles for Women in Indian Army Is Not a Feminist Victory." Al Jazeera, March 3, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/3/3/equal-roles-for-women-in-indian-army-is-not-a-feminist-victory/>.

^{ix} Ibid

^x Ibid

^{xi} Ibid

^{xii} Ibid

^{xiii} Sehgal, Rahesha. "Opinion: Changing Role of Women in the Indian Armed Forces." Wion. Accessed April 7, 2025. <https://www.wionews.com/opinions-blogs/opinion-changing-role-of-women-in-the-indian-armed-forces-391292>.

^{xiv} "Women in Defence Forces." Press Information Bureau. Accessed April 7, 2025. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1945707>.

^{xv} Ibid

^{xvi} Ibid

^{xvii} Ibid

^{xviii} Siddiqui, Huma. "Financialexpress." Defence News | The Financial Express, November 4, 2024. <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-breaking-barriers-at-sea-women-in-indian-navy-redefine-maritime-strength-and-inclusivity-3656037/>.

^{xix} Ibid

^{xx} Ibid

^{xxi} Ibid 14

^{xxii} "Women in Indian Air Force." Women in Indian Air Force. Accessed April 8, 2025. <https://www.sps-aviation.com/story/?id=2125&h=Women-in-Indian-Air-Force>.

^{xxiii} Ibid 14

^{xxiv} Ibid 14

^{xxv} Khosla, Anil. "494: Women in Indian Armed Forces: Prospects and Challenges." Air Marshals Perspective, December 27, 2024. <https://55nda.com/blogs/anil-khosla/2024/07/17/women-in-indian-armed-forces-prospects-and-challenges/>.

^{xxvi} Mishra, Yogesh, Upasana Mohanty, Shrishti Jeswani, and Pallavi Panda. "The Changing Contours of Women in Armed Forces: A Comparative Study of India and Israel." SSRN, May 31, 2022. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4110311.

^{xxvii} Ibid

^{xxviii} Ibid

^{xxix} Ayushi Mittal Follow on X Send an email, Ayushi Mittal, Follow on X, and Send an email. "7 Nation Which Recruit Women in Combat Roles, While India Is Still Romanticizing the Idea." One World News, March 2, 2022. <https://www.oneworldnews.com/women-talk/women-in-combat-roles/>.

^{xxx} Ibid