

Women in the Armed Forces: Misconceptions and Facts*

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The recent debate about the induction of women in the Armed Forces has been highly skewed and shallow. An issue that critically affects the fighting potential of the Armed Forces has been reduced to 'equality of sexes' and 'women's liberation'. Many ill-informed observers have trifled such a sensitive matter by terming it as 'conquering the last male bastion'. Sadly, stances have been taken more on the basis of personal views and mind-sets rather than on well evolved logic. Both military and non-military experts are equally guilty in this regard.

In the recent past, the Nation was shocked to hear a retired senior Army officer recommending constitution of all women battalions in the Indian Army. There cannot be a more preposterous and perilous proposition. It is equally common to hear the argument that if the Naxalites and LTTE can have women fighters, why the Indian Armed Forces should be reluctant to do so. Often people quote the number of American women fighting war in Iraq and Afghanistan to question India's stance against allowing women in combat. This article endeavours to remove some common misconceptions and put all issues in their proper perspective.

To start with, it needs to be stressed that the Services carry no male chauvinistic mindset. The very fact that daughters of Service officers have excelled in all fields proves that Service officers do not suffer from any gender bias and are very supportive of women's advancement. However, the issue of women's induction in the Services warrants singular treatment.

It will be instructive to take a look at the genesis of the issue. Earlier, entry of women was limited to the Army Medical Corps, the Army Dental Corps and the Military Nursing Service. In the

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early 1990s, a Service Chief visited the United States and saw women participating in Guards of Honour. He was suitably impressed and wondered why India should lag behind in this aspect. This shows that the decision to induct women was neither need-based nor well thought-through. The first batch of women Short Service Commission (SSC) officers joined in 1992. No attempt was made to study likely long term implications of multiple issues involved and their effect on the fighting potential of the Services. In other words, a decision of colossal significance was taken in a totally cavalier, slapdash and hasty manner. As the other two Services did not want to be seen as 'male-chauvinists', they followed suit. Soon a race got underway between the three Services to induct women in maximum number of fields. It is only now that a plethora of complex issues are getting thrown up with resultant adverse fall-out.

Presently, the Indian Army counts 2.44 per cent women in its ranks, the Indian Navy 3.0 per cent and the Indian Air Force 6.7 per cent. The tenure of women SSC officers has since been increased to 14 years.¹ The Government has also approved grant of Permanent Commission to SSC (Women) officers prospectively in Judge Advocate General (JAG) Department and Army Education Corps (AEC) of Army and their corresponding Branch/Cadre in Navy and Air Force, Accounts Branch of the Air Force and Corps of Naval Constructors of the Navy.²

Common Misconceptions and Facts

Women must get equal opportunities in the Services. The concept of equality of sexes is unquestionable. Its application should, however, never affect the fighting potential of the Armed Forces. Two points need to be highlighted here. First, the Armed Forces are constituted for National defence and there can be no compromise on that issue. Secondly, the Armed Forces are not a 'Rozgar Yojana' to provide employment to all segments of the society in equal proportion. As it is a question of Nation's defence, the best man or woman should be selected for every job. In other words, women should be inducted in the Services only if they add value or at least not affect it adversely. No right thinking individual can advocate women's induction at the cost of the fighting potential. That would be disastrous for the Country.

Interestingly, demand for equal opportunities is selective in nature. Women want to join only as officers and not as soldiers. Additionally, the concept of equality is given a go-by soon after commissioning. Applications for peace postings and other special dispensations proliferate. They join the Military on the plank of equality of sexes but this plank vanishes the day they join the training academy. Thereafter, they again become the weaker sex needing special privileges.

Women can perform all physical tasks as well as men.

Standards of physical fitness of women can never be the same as those of men. It is a biological reality and is true for all fields including sports. In the case of women officers, Indian Army has lowered the standards to appallingly low levels. Even then many women fail to qualify during their pre-commission training. Whereas male cadets are required to run 5 km in 28 minutes, women are given 40 minutes. Similarly, males are required to jump across a 9 feet wide ditch with full equipment and personal weapon; women have to negotiate only a 5 feet wide ditch.³ Worse, most women fail in the test.

All male officers and soldiers are subjected to annual Battle Physical Efficiency Tests till they attain the age of 45 years. No such tests have been prescribed for women officers to avoid embarrassment to them in front of the troops. Concerns have also been expressed about the susceptibility of Indian women to frequent back problems, pelvic injuries and stress fractures.

A recent review conducted by the British Army concluded that women have neither the upper-body strength nor the physical resilience to withstand intensive combat. Tests in 2000 respondents found that women were eight times more likely than men to sustain injuries other than wounds in action.⁴

Physical fitness is of lesser importance in modern fighting.

Need for physical effort is dictated by two factors - level of technological development and nature of military's involvement. Requirement for physical prowess undoubtedly reduces as the armies advance technologically. In other words, quantum of physical effort needed is inversely proportional to technological progression. Thus, as an army evolves technologically, more high-tech jobs get generated where technically qualified women can be gainfully employed. In a high-tech army like the USA, a woman sitting in the US mainland can effectively guide drone attacks in

Afghanistan. India on the other hand is still a second generation technology force which is trying desperately to graduate to the third generation. Indian Defence Forces are man-power intensive needing physical ground effort. India has very few high-tech jobs.

As regards degree and extent of a military's involvement in active combat duties, countries like Canada and Australia face no internal or external threat and their militaries are generally in peacetime mode with routine passive duties. They can certainly afford to have a larger per centage of women in their forces. Contrast this with India where the majority of Army troops are deployed on active combat duties in remote, inhospitable and uncongenial areas. Only physically fit and tough troops can survive. Worse, peace tenures are short and there are very few periods of comparative lull.

Therefore, the Indian Services continue to be physical-power intensive and will remain so in the near future. Only the very fit can survive to deliver in India's hostile environment.

The USA has deployed a large number of women soldiers for fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although a large number of women have been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, their employment has been confined to support functions. Although till the end of 2009, the USA and allies had suffered a total of 4689 casualties, there has not been a single woman war casualty. Similarly, despite the fact that the USA and allies have suffered 1555 casualties, not a single woman has lost her life in the Afghanistan war so far.⁵ Many people tend to confuse casualties due to hostile action with combat casualties. The USA has lost 19 female soldiers in Iraq to hostile activities like car bombs, IED blasts and helicopter crashes since the beginning of 2007, but there has been no combat casualty. It is simply because of the fact no women are deployed in combat duties. As a matter of fact, they are forbidden to be placed in direct ground combat with enemy. They generally perform medical, intelligence, logistic and traffic control duties. Women are thus kept sheltered in safe appointments, away from the risk of capture by the adversary.

Even in Israel which has conscription for women (as well as men), women are not allotted active battle field duties. They serve in technical, administrative and training posts to release men for active duty.

If BSF can have an all women battalion to guard border, why not the Indian Army? The Border Security Force (BSF) has certainly raised an all women battalion and deployed it on the international border. However, the following important facts need to be highlighted:-

(a) The battalion is led by male officers and subordinate functionaries.

(b) The battalion has not been positioned on the Line of Control (LoC) where firing and infiltration attempts are frequent. Instead, it has been deployed near Ferozepur on the International Border (IB) which is totally peaceful and where Indian and Pakistani troops routinely exchange sweets on festivals.

(c) Even on IB no independent sector has been entrusted to the women battalion. It has been superimposed on an existing male battalion. Importantly, women perform no night guard duties – these are performed by males.

Earlier, village women were not allowed to go across the border fence to cultivate their fields as no women sentries were available to frisk them. It was a sore point with the border folks. The sole purpose of raising the women battalion is to redress this long standing grievance. Their task is akin to what CISF women have been carrying out at the airports for long – frisking of women. Therefore, it will be incorrect to call the BSF battalion a fighting force.

Women officers help overcome the shortage of officers in the Forces. It is an erroneous impression that there is a shortage of male volunteers for the Services. As per the report of the Union Public Service Commission for 2006-07, there were a total of 5,49,365 candidates for 1724 vacancies for all Civil Services examinations with an Applicants to Post Ratio (APR) of 319. On the other hand, 3,41,818 candidates applied for 793 vacancies in the National Defence Academy (NDA), maintaining APR at a healthy 431. It implies that for every seat in NDA there were 431 applicants.⁶ Therefore, it is a fallacy that male volunteers are insufficient. It is just that the Services seek very exacting standards for males while women are accepted with abysmally low standards.

Short Service Commission (SSC) for women has proved highly productive. As a matter of fact, SSC (normally extended to 10

years) has proved to be a totally wasteful and counter-productive exercise. Women normally get commissioned at the age of 23 to 25 years. Within two to three years of their commission, they get married, mostly to colleague male officers. Soon, thereafter, they start applying for peace postings on compassionate grounds to be with their husbands. Every pregnancy means three years' exemption from physical activities – one year pre-natal and two years post-delivery. With the standard two-child norm, a women officer remains physically inactive for close to six years. It implies that after the first post-commission tenure, a woman officer is rarely in a position to participate in field exercises and has to be exempted all out-door work. Thus, the Services gain little.

In an informal interaction, a senior Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) questioned the rationale of granting SSC to women. "In the case of men, 25 to 35 years age span is most productive and grant of SSC is understandable. On the other hand, women have to raise their families during that period. By granting SSC to women, we have achieved nothing except increase the load on maternity wards of military hospitals," he opined.

If women can fight as soldiers in LTTE and Naxalite outfits, why not in the Services? Comparing irregular outfits with constitutionally created regular forces shows speciousness of the logic. In any case, even LTTE recruited women only after it fell short of male volunteers. Moreover, women held no high appointments and were generally used as pawns in indoctrinated suicide squads. If one was to carry the comparison forward, LTTE had recruited boys of 15 years to take up arms and act as human bombs. A lawfully structured formal organisation cannot be expected to follow suit.

Indian women officers have proved themselves and established their credibility as leaders. Notwithstanding the public posturing of the Services top brass, the experience so far has been highly discouraging. Superior male officers admire their enthusiasm despite the environmental difficulties, but are faced with the twin problems of their safety and useful employment. Additionally, as many duties (like night duty officer) cannot be assigned to women, male officers have to be given additional work load, which they resent. There are also concerns, based on Israeli studies, that soldiers first instinct may be to defend the women in their ranks rather than to fight the enemy.

Male officers also question the logic of having women only as an officer. Indian officers pride themselves in the fact that they lead from the front and hence have to be better than their soldiers both physically and professionally. But, by having women only in the officer cadre an impression gets conveyed to the environment that officers' duties are softer and can be carried out by women as well, thereby lowering their standing.

As per an informal survey carried out, 81 per cent of the troops were convinced that women officers could never lead them in war efficiently. The balance 19 per cent were unsure of their response.⁷ Acceptability of women as leaders was thus very poor. Another segment of respondents viewed the whole issue as a political gimmick which did not warrant serious attention. "How can the Government be naïve enough to think that a leader who cannot run, train and exercise with troops and lacks required physical fitness can lead them in war?" they query.

Women in Western forces are well accepted and adjusted. It is a fallacy. Acceptance of women in the Military has not been smooth in any country. Despite efforts made to sensitise the environment, they continue to be confronted with social, behavioural and psychological problems at all levels. To date most countries do not allow women tank crews because of the cramped conditions and lack of privacy. There are also concerns about cramped living conditions on board submarines and dangers posed by fumes inside the submarine to a foetus if a woman becomes pregnant.

Sexual harassment and assaults of women soldiers is known to be blatant and quite prevalent in the US forces. A sexual harassment hotline set up at Aberdeen received 6,825 calls from women from all branches of the military in just two months.⁸ Hundreds of women are said to have complained of sexual assault in the forces since the beginning of Iraq war in 2003.⁹ Level of moral degradation can be gauged from the fact that 'command rape' has come to be accepted as a common phenomenon in the military - a superior official, under the might of his command authority, can force a subordinate woman soldier to accede to his sexual demands.¹⁰

A joint survey carried out in 2006 in the UK by the Ministry of Defence and the Equal Opportunities Commission found that 67

per cent of the respondents had experienced sexualised behaviour directed at them personally in the previous 12 months. Worse, over half of those who made a formal complaint stated that there had been negative consequences as a result of which 64 per cent were considering leaving the Services.¹¹

On the other hand, Indian Armed Forces can be rightfully proud of their record which is far better than that of any advanced nation in the world. Women are treated in a manner befitting their dignity and their safety is ensured.

India Needs to Exercise Caution

It is universally accepted that induction of women in the Services should be dictated by the level of technology, prevailing security environment and the nature of likely deployment. Availability of adequate number of male volunteers is another major consideration.

India should follow a graduated approach. Women's expertise, talent and competence should be profitably utilised in areas which are totally non-combat in nature. For the present, women must continue to play their established role in the medical, dental and nursing services, both as SSC and Permanent Regular Commission (PRC) officers. However, they should not be granted SSC in any other branch. The Government has rightly approved grant of PRC to women in Legal and Education departments of the three Services, Accounts Branch of the Air Force and Constructors of the Navy. Grant of PRC should also be considered for women in Survey of India, Military Engineering Service Militarised Cadre and Director General Quality Assurance.

The current policy of non-induction of women in combat arms should continue. Additionally, their entry into Engineers, Signals, Supply Corps, Ordnance and Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (EME) should be deferred till infusion of technology generates adequate number of high-tech jobs.

Finally, it should never be forgotten that the *raison d'être* for the constitution of the Armed Forces is to ensure security of the Country. Decisions which have a far reaching effect on the defence potential of the Armed Forces must be taken with due diligence. Instead of replicating a model, India must chart its own policy. It has an experience of 18 years. Honest feedback must be sought

to appreciate the true ground situation and initiate corrective measures. Most importantly, the military brass must show moral courage to admit that the present mess demands a holistic review of the policy, protestations of self-styled champions of gender-parity notwithstanding. Decisions taken as a matter of political and populist expediency can prove disastrous for the Nation in the long run. Defence matters cannot be treated as publicity gimmick to flaunt sexual equality.

End Notes

1. This information was given by Minister of Defence Minister Shri AK Antony in a written reply to Shri Syed Shahnawaz Hussain in Lok Sabha on 16 Dec 2009. See <http://pib.nic.in/release/release.asp?relid=56000&kwd=>
2. Ibid
3. Information received from sources in Officers Training Academy, Chennai.
4. Findings of the British "Combat Effectiveness Gender Study". See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/4182428/Army-decides-to-keep-women-off-the-front-line.html>
5. Up to date details of the US and the allies casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan are available at <http://icasualties.org/>
6. Annual report of the Union Public Service Commission for the year 2006-07, available at <http://www.upsc.gov.in>
7. Over 120 JCOs and Other Ranks of different arms and Services were informally spoken to. Most thought that induction of women was a frivolous decision.
8. The Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on 'Sexual Harassment in the Military', available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/jan-june97/harassment_2-4.html. Also see Paper on "Sexual Harassment of Women in the Military" by National Women's Law centre, Washington D.C.
9. Andrea Lewis, 'Pentagon cultivating culture of violence against women', the Salt Lake Tribune of 19 Jul 2006.
10. Ibid
11. Report of Ministry of Defence/Equal Opportunities Commission on 'Quantitative & Qualitative Research into Sexual Harassment in the Armed Forces' of Mar 2006; available at <http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/538E55EE-9CA4-4177-9A0B-6853A431B283/0/20060522SRReport.pdf>