



Women and National Defense: Challenges, Triumphs and Male Response

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Abstract:

The present study has been focused on the induction of women in the armed forces which has been highly skewed and shallow. This has been based on an issue that critically affects the fighting potential of the armed forces, providing fundamental right of equality of sexes and also leading to women's liberation. Many ill-informed observers have trifled such a sensitive matter by terming it as 'conquering the last male bastion'. This is an issue of great contradiction where many stances have been taken more on the basis of personal views and mind-sets rather than on well evolved logic. The women have always been considered to be subordinate to men in every society of world. For Starting, this issue needs to be stressed that the services carry no male chauvinistic mindset. This is well known fact that fact that daughters of our country have excelled in all fields from the times immemorial and that higher class persons 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. However, there are also the instances of narrow mindsets for the induction of women in armed forces. In the recent past, everyone was shocked on hearing a retired senior Army officer who recommended the constitution of all women battalions in the Indian Army. There cannot be a more preposterous and perilous proposition. Many organizations including various industries and large companies do not show gender bias in this age of development. Often we go across the news of hearing a number of American women soldiers fighting in war in Iraq and Afghanistan fights against militants. This is not equally true and acceptable in India's stance against allowing women to join armed forces. The present study is an endeavour to remove some common misconceptions and put all issues in their proper perspective.

Key words: National defense; women rights; equality; harassment; social status etc.

Introduction:

In studying the recent human history we find that women soldiers have been part of each and every campaign, performing variety of tasks such as washing, mending and cooking, ammunition carriers or picking up a weapon of a wounded soldier. In Indian history the women are remembered with great honour to led many wars.

Some of these heroines may by innumerable as Rani Durgawati, Chand Bibi, Rani Laxmi Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal etc. During World war II, Vietnam war and technological revolutions which affected intake of male recruits in Asian armies, Europe and USA opened the way for the induction of women to fill the vacancies as soldiers. The women have always offered great

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services for the security of their motherland and also have shown greater humanistic values against the enemies. Many women serving as ambassadors have opened the doors of peace treaties also. The European armies have a healthy number of women soldiers in the armed forces. Over the last 50 years, China has also integrated women into the military. The pioneers of the integration of the women in South Asia, both in officers and ranks was the Sri Lankan armed forces in year 1984, followed by India in officers rank in 1991 and Nepal in 2003. Pakistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan employ women basically in medical role. India's decision to induct women officers was based on populist consideration than military necessities. Even after the induction of women into armed forces, the women are considered to be incapable for conflict against enemies. They are assigned only supportive roles.

It will be instructive to take a look at the genesis of the issue. Earlier, the entry of women was limited to only the medical services including the Army Medical Corps, the Army Dental Corps and the Military Nursing Service. In the early 90s, 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. Thus 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. Since the beginning of women induction into armed forces in 1992, when the Army opened its doors to women, their numbers have only grown. In 1992, only about 1800 women candidates applied for entering into armed forces. At that time, Army had the luxury

of screening 36 applicants for each vacancy. In 2005, the figure increased upto 150 applicants per vacancy. Since then, this numbers has seen a steady increase. Ninety three lady officers enrolled in 2010, 166 the following year. In 22 years, their strength has grown from 50 to about 1300 women candidates.

Challenges for women:

In the present times of equalization of opportunities for both men and women, serving women officers have to face many challenges to prove their combating talents. They are always supposed to be inferior to their male counterparts. There are many cases in the news where many women candidates are willing to give up their jobs due to this inferior behaves of their seniors. The women are also entered through Short Service Commission and they have to leave the force after completion of 14 years of service. Even they have prescribed fitness and zeal and jest to serve the nation, but they are devoid of service on permanent basis. Major Shradha Bhatt, a Electronic and Engineers Mechanical officer commented that 'I had all the josh and even did field postings but found that we had to prove ourselves for everything'.

Behaviour of seniors towards women candidates:

The study also throws light on the mindsets of both male officers towards the female officers. Complaints of jokes after drinks and unwarranted attention figured only occasionally. The male officers felt that the women also harassed them in various forms- using charm with senior officers and wondered why they demanded equality. The senior officers treat women candidates only as a figure of amusement and harass them on many occasions. Gender



sensitivity is a sore issue. In the words of Major Bhatt who pointed out pertinently, 'Most commanding officers think we are liabilities'. But many times women officers are also posted at places where they don't separate living facilities even separate toilets for them. They say they put us at par with men, but the men counterparts treat them inferiorly.

Combat Equipment Problem

If there is an entry about the problems that women face in forces, the number one response that they will get is 'Women shouldn't be in combat'. Every social group comments this. "The problem with the current status of women in the military is that it is about the last place that it is totally cool to discriminate based on gender. A complaint about something like equipment not fitting properly isn't about it being uncomfortable or not looking good. You kind of need everything to work as it was designed, since a war zone provides remarkably little margin for error for, say, ill-fitting body armor. The smallest sizes for packs, flak jackets, and boots being still too big or small for her, and to make things worse, the people in charge refuse to order new ones. And sizes aside, most of the equipments are designed for men, which not only means that it doesn't really fit (because women are shaped differently) but that it's designed for someone who can pee standing up. The women have to face the problem of equipments which are designed for only men's use. Luckily, the military has been developing technology to allow women to pee while standing up just like their male comrades, which is a technological marvel that no one in the private sector would ever be able to.

Medical Problems

Women in the military have to deal with male doctors who have little to no experience treating females. It's even worse if they are injured during combat activities. Tammy Duckworth, the first female double amputee in Iraq, woke up in a hospital bed to find a "comfort kit" full of men's clothes and hygiene equipment waiting for her. This is a soldier who flew 120 combat hours in Iraq and helped land a helicopter after her legs were blown off by a grenade, but she still didn't have the right comfort kit when she woke up, because it never occurred to anyone to make one for a female. The point is that the military is still acting like it's weird that a female showed up, like she stumbled into the wrong locker room. A woman also faces stress caused by something as simple as getting a car impounded or coming short on rent or hundreds of people with AK-47s trying to kill her all the day. This would again be an easy opportunity for somebody to say, 'Another reason women shouldn't be in combat'. But there are ways that women on the battlefield can basically eradicate this problem that are both easy and readily available. It's just that lots of the time women are simply not told about them. Because no one seems to remember women are even there.

Promotion of women based on sexual favour towards seniors:

The reports say 15 percent of women in the military have been pressured for sexual favors, and the government accountability office assumes the number is a lot higher, with many women deciding not to report their harassment or assault because of how much of a joke the process is. Many women officers have accusations that her commanding officer would



hold basic paperwork necessary for her job hostage until she performed sexual favors for him. It's not long after a woman joins that she learns that some of her superiors see her as less of a soldier and more of a potential date and by "date," we of course mean concubine. After an inspection of her performance as part of a maintenance program, Noble was told that the inspector could promise her a better review if she went to dinner with him. Then she found out that other women on her team were told the same thing about the same inspector. She and the other women ended up refusing, and not only did their review suffer, it was made clear they weren't team players.

Triumphs of women efforts:

It would, however, be unfair to treat all women officers with the same brush. Many officers spoke that there were few among them willing to be glamorous hostesses but that most of them and their course mates were focused on their work. There are many lady officers who want preferential treatment. If they sit with the wives of male officers, they can't complain about being treated like ladies. Senior officers have, in fact, often erred on the wrong side of gender. Lieutenant General S. Pattabhiraman had as the Vice Chief - second only to the army chief - declared in 2006 that they could do without women officers. He retracted quickly but the damage was done. Retired officers have also written passionately against inducting women or expanding their role to include inducting them into combat duties like in the US and the UK. Major General Mrinal Suman (Retd), writing for the Indian Defence Review in 2010, said, "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. It is only now that a plethora of complex issues are getting thrown up with resultant adverse fall-out.

The Indian Army has held several reviews, including recently, and has once again ruled out combat duties for its women officers. An army spokesman said that they were now in favour of offering permanent commission starting 2016, but that is only one of the issues plaguing women who want to be in uniform.

Suggestions for betterment of conditions of women as combatants:

Following are some suggestions for the betterment of conditions of women in the armed forces-

(i) Equality of opportunities:

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 defense 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 defense, 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.

(ii) Consideration of Physique of women

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. 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.

(iii) Establishment of Women Battalions:

The Border Security Force has certainly raised an all women battalion and deployed it on the international border. However, the following important facts need to be highlighted:-

- The battalion is led by male officers and subordinate functionaries.

- The battalion has not been positioned on the Line of Control 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 Pak troops routinely exchange sweets on festivals.

- 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.

The same pattern should be adopted by the Defense forces of nation.

Conclusion:

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 during 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 of 319. On the other hand, 3,41,818 candidates applied for 793 vacancies in the National Defence Academy, maintaining APR at a healthy 431. It implies that for every seat in NDA there were 431 applicants. 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.

Indian women officers have proved themselves and established their credibility as leaders. Not with-standing 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 that soldiers first instinct may be to defend the women in their ranks rather than to fight the enemy. The various organization related to defense sector should take initiative to give

women an equal status as those of male counterparts. The women should be encouraged to take part in combats with a feeling of security of their life and family. The feeling of inferiority needs to be removed from the minds of both man and women of the society. only then we can call our society and culture a developed society and developed culture.