



## 5. Challenges for Women in Full-fledged Combat Role

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### Abstract

*Growing demand to induct the women in ground combat role in units such as Infantry and Armoured at first look appears justified. Women have excelled in all fields yet they are being denied this opportunity in the defence forces. However, the danger of women soldiers if posted in combat units such as infantry and armoured units is very high. The combat role demands a very high degree of physical and mental strength besides societal pressures of exposing women to such tasks. The experience of the other countries in inducting women in combat units is also not very encouraging. Even the Indian Culture looks at women in Combat as a very risky proposition. However, the world is changing, women are performing in security establishments with equal vigour and stamina. The society is also coming around to women being given greater and challenging roles. Therefore, if the correct conditions are created in the society to increase the acceptability of women soldiers being captured by enemy troops, their body bags being received from the frontlines, and internal organisational environment in the units and brigade being fortified by strong laws and safe living conditions; it may be feasible to induct women in full-fledged combat role. The present paper addresses these issues in detail.*

**Key words:** Women, Combat Role, defence forces

### Introduction

While historically there are a number of examples where women have participated in warfare and have occasionally formed part of armies, their numbers and instances were few. The primary reason being a male dominated social fabric across the world and the protective attitude towards women, as war was and is considered a dangerous activity. The practitioners of warfighting put forward logical reasons to include or not include women in the defence forces and in particular ground combat role. This paper is an attempt to analyse the views of those in favour or opposed to the proposal of inducting women in Ground Combat Role (GCR) and then offer recommendations whether the time is right to induct women in this role.<sup>1</sup>

### Methodology of Research

The research paper looked at the problem of induction of women in the defence forces for a full-fledged combat role due to the growing demand in the country and elsewhere in the world to do so. Logically too, the human race normally comprises 50% males and 50% females. So while in other jobs males and females compete equally then why not in the defence forces? Females have also entered in the police and Central Police Armed Forces in India. Israel too gives combat role to females at least the policy has been made to do so. Therefore, what stops countries like India and the US to induct them in combat role units such as Infantry and Armoured, Some countries have started inducting them in combat role but the progress is

<sup>1</sup>Ground Combat Role (GCR) is referred to soldiers who are involved in direct fighting against each other where finally the battle may end up with hand-to-hand fight with each other. The soldiers face each other eye to eye and the danger is maximum in such a combat. Normally in the Army Infantry and Armoured are right on the front line. The physical proximity between one person to the other with the enemy and with own troops is at times almost negligible while performing a military operation. That is the reason that women soldiers are not preferred in Infantry and even Engineers, Signals and Artillery.

extraordinarily slow. This paper discusses the pros and cons of according such a role to women based on two methods of research. Firstly available literature on the subject and secondly very long experience of the author himself in dealing with women officers in the Indian Army. The hypothesis of the paper is that given the right environment especially in sensitising the society to accept women in combat role would help induct women in full-fledged combat role in the defence forces.

## Current Status of Women in Combat : Interpretation

If we look at the history of women in combat in Bharat Varsha, the most prominent example that stands out in support of women in the combat is that of Rani Jhansi who actively fought the British during the first war of Independence in 1857. Similarly, a number of women were involved in the freedom struggle in some form or the other but comparatively their numbers were few. In a regimented form their induction into combat as an infantry unit was done for the first time by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose who formed the Rani Jhansi Regiment of the Azad Hind Fauj. The Amrit Mahotsav government of India Site has this to tell about the Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army (INA).<sup>2</sup>



“Most of the women were teenage volunteers of Indian descent from Malayan rubber estates; very few had ever been to India. The initial nucleus of the force was established with its training camp in Singapore with approximately a hundred and seventy cadets. The cadets were given ranks of non-commissioned officer or sepoy (private) according to their education. Later, camps were established in Rangoon and Bangkok and by November 1943, the unit had more than three hundred cadets. Training in Singapore began on 23 October 1943. The recruits were divided into sections and platoons and were accorded ranks of Non-Commissioned Officers and Sepoys according to their educational qualifications. These cadets underwent military and combat training with drills, route marches as well as weapons training in rifles, hand grenades, and bayonet charges. Later, a number of

<sup>2</sup>amritmahotsav.nic.in. 2021. Jhansi Regiment Case in Army (1940). 05 August. Accessed September 16, 2023. <https://amritmahotsav.nic.in/freedom-movement-detail.htm?13>.



the cadets were chosen for more advanced training in jungle warfare in Burma. The Regiment had its first passing out parade at the Singapore training camp of five hundred troops on 30 March 1944.

Some 200 of the cadets were also chosen for nursing training, forming the Chand Bibi Nursing Corps. During the INA's Imphal campaign, an initial contingent of nearly a hundred of the Rani of Jhansi troops moved to Maymyo, part of which was intended to form a vanguard unit to enter the Gangetic plains of Bengal after the expected fall of Imphal. A part of the unit also formed the nursing corps at the INA hospital at Maymyo. Following the failure of the siege of Imphal and the INA's disastrous retreat, the Rani troops were tasked with coordinating the relief and care of the INA troops who arrived at Monywa and to Maymyo and were not used in combat. After the fall of Rangoon and the withdrawal of the Azad Hind government and Subhas Chandra Bose from the city and through Burma, the troops originally from Burma were allowed to disband, while the remainder of the regiment retreated along with the retreating Japanese forces on foot and, when available, on mechanised transport. During the retreat it suffered some attacks both, from Allied air attacks, as well the Burmese resistance forces. The total number of casualties suffered is not known. The unit later disbanded.

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army (INA) was raised and trained in Japanese-occupied Malaya and Singapore in 1943-45. It saw action against the Allies in Burma during 1944-45. This is the first history of the remarkable Regiment made up of young Indian women from towns and rubber plantations. Many had left comfortable lives to take part in this liberation struggle. The girls who had never seen India yet, were eager to enlist to liberate India from colonial bondage. It was one of the very few all-female combat regiments of the Second World War on any side. Led by Caption Lakshmi Swaminathan [popularly known as caption Lakshmi Sehgal] the unit was named the Rani of Jhansi Regiment after Rani Lakshmibai, of Jhansi.”<sup>3</sup>

The above text has been reproduced in full to convey the spirit and the will of the women of India, who when required can become Kali from a doting mother, sister or wife. The above narration and information of Jhansi Regiment has been confirmed by many sources including those who returned alive from the battlefield. To the best of the knowledge of the author Captain Lakshmi Sehgal herself has mentioned about the role and work of the Jhansi Regiment in various public functions organised in her honour. To further confirm the role of Women in Combat it would be prudent to examine the case of other countries as well. The historical experience of the US army is mentioned below.

“From the battlefields of the American Revolution to the deserts of Kuwait, women have been serving in the military in one form or another for more than 200 years. They have had to overcome decades of obstacles to get to where they are today: serving in greater numbers, in combat roles and in leadership positions all around the world. In the Revolutionary War women were not always permitted to enlist in the U.S. Armed Forces, many still found ways to serve their nation. During the Revolutionary War, as colonial militias armed themselves and joined George Washington’s Continental Army, many of these soldiers’ wives, sisters, daughters and mothers went with them. These women travelled alongside the Continental Army, where they boosted morale as well as mended clothes, tended to wounds, foraged for food, cooked and cleaned both laundry and cannons. Some women found ways to join the

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.



fight for independence. Margaret Corbin, for example, disguised herself as a man and travelled with her husband to the front lines of the Battle of Fort Washington, where she helped him load his cannon. When her husband was shot by enemy fire, Corbin carried on fighting, even after being shot three times. She was given a military pension in acknowledgment of her efforts, and years after her death was reburied at West Point with full military honours. Similarly, Deborah Sampson fought disguised as a man for years before her true sex was revealed. Other women, such as Lydia Darragh, also supported the war effort by spying on behalf of the Patriots.”<sup>4</sup>

The above incidents present a very strong argument in favour of including women in combat role. It may be probably because of these incidents of history that despite a male dominated society which has generally considered women as the weaker gender both physically and mentally, over eight countries in the world have women in ground combat roles(GCR).The first country to induct women in combat role was Australia.<sup>5</sup> Till Dec 2019, there were approximately 3.8% women officers amounting to approximately 1500 against 40000 male officers in the Indian Army. Indian Airforce has 13% and Indian Navy 6 % women officers. There were no women in the armed forces below officer rank till Dec 2019.<sup>6</sup> In January 2020 the first batch of military police women troops were inducted. A beginning has been made but many consider these steps as too little and too slow. Further it has still kept the women out of the direct Ground Combat Role (GCR) units such as Infantry, Armoured, and Mechanised Infantry. It will be worth examining why is it so?

## Why there is Resistance to Women in GCR; the Case of US Army?

Even in the U.S. military, women are barred from units that engage in direct combat on the ground. Regardless, some American women have served in combat situations with ground units in Iraq and Afghanistan – a reflection of the changing nature of warfare and the disappearance of the kind of front lines that existed in conflicts such as World War II and Korea. Among other things, the U.S. military has created teams of female Marines and soldiers who patrol with their male counterparts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and interact with local women in ways that the military said would be culturally unacceptable for male soldiers. In Iraq, American female soldiers trained as cooks also were awarded combat action badges after being pressed into duty in other areas that exposed them to battle, according to the U.S. Military Leadership Diversity Commission. However, given their performance in recent times, the ban on induction of women in the US Army is likely to be lifted. The reasons are obvious, more than 140 American women have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to the Pentagon. A 2008 armed forces survey found that 85% of female service members had been deployed to a combat zone or drew extra pay funnelled to members of the military who serve in dangerous or hostile areas.<sup>7</sup>

### Positive Movement to Induct Women in GCR

The US started contemplating about GCR for women in 2013. Today they do have women in Marine Corps and some infantry combat units. However, there is a catch. But Such units are employed only in

<sup>4</sup>DeSimone, Danielle. 2023. Over 200 Years of Service: The History of Women in the U.S. Military. 28 February. Accessed September 16, 2023. <https://www.uso.org/stories/3005-over-200-years-of-service-the-history-of-women-in-the-us-military>.

<sup>5</sup>CNN Wire Staff. 2011. “Australia lifts restrictions for women in combat roles”. CNN. 11 September. Accessed September 12, 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2011/09/27/world/asia/australia-women-combat/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup>Biswas, Soutik. 2020. “India's soldiers 'not ready for women in combat' Published”. BBC.com. 08 February. Accessed September 12, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-51385224>.

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<sup>7</sup>CNN Wire Staff. 2011. “Australia lifts restrictions for women in combat roles”. CNN. 11 September. Accessed September 12, 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2011/09/27/world/asia/australia-women-combat/index.html>.



protective and relatively safer duties. Australia opened combat role for women in 2011. France has opened all units to women including Infantry. But women comprise only 1.7%<sup>8</sup> which proves the difficulty of firstly adequate number of women volunteers and secondly their ability to meet the selection criteria. In UK defence forces of a total 106,580 trained and untrained personnel in the army, 8,470 are women – 7.9%. Its navy is conducting a separate review into whether women should be allowed to be members of submarine crews. At present they are banned because of concern about the impact of continually recycled air on pregnant women. UK has opened number of roles are still banned from Combat Roles. A report of MoD UK has concluded that mixed gender combat groups could have grave consequences. However in 2018, the UK military lifted this ban.<sup>9</sup>

We can appreciate from the above information that globally an effort has been made to include women in GCR both as officers and troops. The success rate however has been very low as far as GCR is concerned. The strength of women soldiers in GCR varies from a maximum of 33 % in case of Israel and Eritrea to a minimum of 2 percent in case of Poland and Finland. Bulk of the countries that have women in GCR are from the West except North Korea and Eritrea. Traditionally erstwhile Soviet Union had a large number of women in GCR in first and second WWs but currently they do not have any women in GCR. India, Pakistan and China do not induct women in GCR, but they have women in supporting arms and services units as officers.<sup>10</sup>

### Why the Delay in Offering full-fledged Combat Role

While the above arguments do present a strong case to induct the Women in GCR, there are very strong reasons given out for why they should not be inducted in the GCR in particular Infantry, Armoured, and Engineers and Artillery. Those opposing the move suggest that we cannot infer from few examples mentioned above that women can take on combat roles without any significant difference in outcome of the war specially in hazardous terrain, hostile and fierce battle conditions that they will have to confront. This aspect of why women are not favoured to be part of combat units especially the Infantry is discussed below.

The process some feel is being held up as military organisations of many countries have assessed that they do not bring substantial operational benefits / combat effectiveness to the table. The primary apprehensions are physiological and group cohesion in mixed units and combat effectiveness. Contrary to this perception, US army based on their Iraq and Afghanistan experience have opened all roles to women. Ash Carter former US Defence Secretary had this to say in 2015, “Women have been serving on the front-line and seen combat throughout the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Excluding women from units whose primary mission was engaging in direct ground combat, meant the military was cutting itself off from half the country’s talent and skills, adding “we have to take full advantage of every individual who can meet our standards.”<sup>11</sup> However, it would also be prudent to consider that warfighting is not like playing a sports match where winning or losing does not lead to existential crisis for a nation. There are no draws or runners up in

<sup>8</sup>Anna, Mulrine. 2013. “8 Other Nations That Send Women to Combat”. National Geographic. 26 January. Accessed September 12, 2023. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/130125-women-combat-world-australia-israel-canada-norway>.

<sup>9</sup>Biswas, Soutik. 2020. “India's soldiers 'not ready for women in combat' Published”. BBC.com. 08 February. Accessed September 12, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-51385224>.

<sup>10</sup>Singh, Dushyant. 2021. “Greater Deliberation Required to Induct Women in Combat Role in the Army”. Striveindia.in. 04 March. Accessed September 12, 2023. <https://striveindia.in/greater-deliberation-required-to-induct-women-in-combat-role-in-the-army/>.

<sup>11</sup>Philipps, Matthew Rosenberg, and Dave. 2015. “The New York Times”. All Combat Roles Now Open to Women, Defence Secretary Says. 2015 December. Accessed September 12, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/04/us/politics/combat-military-women-ash-carter.html#:~:text=Carter%20said%20that%20women%20would,remained%20the%20world's%20most%20powerful>.



war. Wars are fought to Win. What we must take note off is that the intake standards should not be lowered. Gender equality does not imply equal numbers.

## Genuine Challenges for Women in GCR

Some of the challenges to women being inducted into the defence forces are firstly, physical disparities, war fighting is a physically arduous task. One has to not only stay in areas such as Siachen, Super High Altitude and remote locations in North Eastern Sectors but also when required take part in close combat including bayonet fighting without distinction between officers and soldiers. Imagine the spectacle after Galvan incident had there been women officers and soldiers in the clash. Is our nation ready to accept physical capture, maimed bodies and body bags of women soldiers? We need to give a serious thought to it whether India as a society is ready to accept such consequences of women in combat role. Do we need some more time, some more sensitisation of the society and above all can we assure victory for the nation. Soldiering cannot be compared to policing. It is like comparing apples and oranges.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly the ground experience of foreign armies have also not been very encouraging. To quote few examples, in 2018 across the entire US Marine Corps there were 92 billets held by enlisted women soldiers but by 2020 only 11 were left. Even in Israel women units are deployed for perimeter security and military police tasks only.<sup>13</sup>In short the jury is still out whether induction of women in combat roles is genuinely beneficial to the organisation. It should not be an initiative to do a mere lip service to appease the women empowerment lobbies in the country.

Thirdly, many cite socio-cultural factors as a reason for not inducting women in combat roles. Patriarchal society, historically non-involvement of women in war fighting, perceiving women as the weaker gender are some of the common reasons. Falling into the trap of liberalism in the name of uniform gender equality without due deliberations as to their pros and cons is fraught with serious and grave danger to the women who will opt for such roles and the likely humiliation that India as a country would have to face where once upon a time an inhuman practice like Jauhar (a practice in which women of the kingdom burned themselves in the event of a possible capture by an invading force).

Fourthly naysayers express serious doubts on the public acceptability of women officers or women soldier getting captured. While Western world may still accept their women soldiers falling in the hands of enemy and seeing their body bags being brought back; is our society ready to accept such a spectacle. Indian people are extremely sensitive and escalation of war would reach levels in the event of body bags of our women soldiers reaching their homes that we may not be able to even visualise today. There are many experts and practitioners who are convinced that India may not be ready for it. The US has been struggling with this issue for over 200 years. We are just a 75 year old nation as far as modern history goes. Future conventional wars are going to be on a scale that may be difficult to predict.

Fifthly, the problem of remote location and small team operations. The working conditions in the Army especially in the remote areas where administrative and functional difficulties preclude safe and secure environment both from the prying eyes of brothers in arms and the enemy; strict Armed Forces Act notwithstanding. Finally fear of sexual harassment. This is a universal problem and Armies across the world are grappling with it. Indian Armed Forces are no different, there are plenty of examples of errant behaviour

<sup>12</sup>This argument is also based on the authors own experience of over 38 years in the Infantry rubbing shoulders with soldiers of our country considered probably the best in the world. Barring 1962 War which was thanks to inadequate attention towards war preparedness of the military due to the policies of the then leadership of the country. Also, Singh, Sidharth. 2014. 1962 war debacle - the errors Jawaharlal Nehru made. 19 Mar. Accessed September 18, 2023.

<https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/HCs4SMg2ojRh1T024T1KxO/1962-war-debaclethe-errors-Jawaharlal-Nehru-made.html>.

<sup>13</sup>Singh, Sidharth. 2014. 1962 war debacle - the errors Jawaharlal Nehru made. 19 Mar. Accessed September 18, 2023.

<https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/HCs4SMg2ojRh1T024T1KxO/1962-war-debaclethe-errors-Jawaharlal-Nehru-made.html>.



against women officers by their male colleagues. One does not advocate that errant behaviour of males against their female counter parts should become a ground for not inducting women in combat role but unfortunately it does impede smooth functioning of the Armed Forces.<sup>14</sup>

### Recommendation

So is there a solution to the problems in inducting women in the Armed Forces. The answer is yes and no. Yes if we are able to create conducive condition to induct women within the Army and sensitize the society towards the possible fall out of women in the GCR. An important factor that may catalyse this process is a gender sensitive military leadership. Gender sensitization in India in particular because of our patriarchist society has always been a challenge. Off late it has become slightly better due to rising standards of education, legal frameworks such as Visakha guidelines at work places<sup>15</sup> and establishment of National and State Commission for Women. However, has it brought about any dramatic change in the mindset? At least not till now. This the author is quoting based on his on ground experience of over 38 years of service in the Army in different capacities and at all levels of Indian Armed Forces Hierarchy including in interaction with Central Armed Police Forces as part of his tenure in the National Security Guard. The point being highlighted is that unless the leader in an organization drives change, it never occurs. Gender parity in the context of Indian society is still a distant dream and needs a transformational leader; who take on the role of change makers and usher in better values, morals and ethics in the organization along with the core task of operational effectiveness. The challenge lies in developing such leaders. Armed Forces have a number of training establishments that can be oriented towards this task. Women in the Defence Forces is a reality but their induction should be without compromising operational effectiveness and operational preparedness because there are no runners up in war. We only fight to win.

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<sup>14</sup>Observation based on authors own experience in almost all sectors and theatre of operations in India and few countries as part of UN mission abroad.

<sup>15</sup> The Vishaka Guidelines were a set of procedural guidelines for use in India in cases of sexual harassment. They were promulgated by the Indian Supreme Court in 1997 and were superseded in 2013 by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act. <http://gptsoraba.in/english/doc/vishakaguidelines.pdf> (accessed on 22 Sep 2023)



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