

Why India Needs a Gender Policy for its Armed Forces

Written by Kiran Chauhan

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KIRAN CHAUHAN, NOV 23 2021

On August 18 2021, the Indian military moved one step further regarding women's participation in the military. Women can now take the NDA exam and enter the armed forces after the 12th grade board exams. The Indian Army also granted time scale Colonel rank to five women officers in August 2021. This is the first time women officers serving with the Corps of Signals, Corps of Electronics and Mechanical Engineers (EME), and the Corps of Engineers have been approved to the rank of Colonel. Earlier, the promotion to Colonel was only applicable for the women officers in Army Education Corps, Army Medical Corps and Judge Advocate General. According to the Ministry of Defense (MoD), 'Combined with the decision to grant permanent commission to women officers from a majority of branches of the Indian Army, this step defines the Indian Army's approach towards a gender-neutral Army.'

Though India is now gradually seeing several developments regarding women's participation, The assertion of the MoD regarding a gender-neutral army needs to be seen and questioned in the light of women's participation and gender reforms in militaries all over the world. Nigeria, in March 2021, launched the gender policy for its armed forces. It focuses on gender mainstreaming and integrating gender into recruitment, training, planning, budgeting and operations. Nigeria is a signatory to United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security, and the implementation of a National Action Plan (NAP) based on resolution 1325 has been crucial in bringing the gender reforms in its armed forces. Despite making crucial contribution to peacekeeping and women's participation in it, India has not implemented a NAP yet.

In 2007, India became the first country to provide All-Female Formed Police Unit (FFPU) for UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia. There were 105 female officers from India's paramilitary troops, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). In 2019, India's first female engagement team was sent to Congo. Despite making considerable contributions regarding women's participation in UN Peacekeeping Missions, India is yet to frame a National Action Plan based on the WPS agenda to increase the participation of women at the domestic level in India's security and military domain. Most of the reforms regarding women in the Indian military have been coming from the country's Supreme Court, which has played a crucial role in opening up the military for women, critiquing in harsh terms the arguments made by the government during the proceedings as rooted in 'gender stereotypes'. Although a series of steps are being taken, from allowing women in Sainik Schools to inducting the first batch of women in Military police, a great deal more needs to be done to make the Indian military more gender-inclusive. Increasing opportunities for women's participation in the Indian military is just the first step.

If India wants to move towards a more gender-integrated military, It needs to critically examine the military's prevalent gendered narratives and discourse. It was only in 2018 that homosexuality was decriminalised in India, and the Indian military hasn't even opened up even a conversation of allowing queer people in the military. Homosexuality is a punishable offence in the military. The distinction between civilians and military culture is provided as a reason to keep the status quo intact. One might argue that India is not ready for this conversation yet, but 'later is a patriarchal time zone' (Enloe 2004). The conversation needs to begin now. Women's participation without engaging with the questions of gender and sexuality in the military will perpetuate the same masculinist culture and marginalisation of women in the military.

When women join military, They join groups whose terms, premises, and behavioural norms are already defined in

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terms of the masculine values that they have prized before the inclusion of women (Sjoberg and Via 2010).

Hence just having more women doesn't make the institution "gender-neutral". There's a big difference between participation, representation and integration. It is possible to achieve equality in representation without actually working at the roots and making the military more conducive for women's participation. Even in terms of representation, India still needs to do much more. As of February 8 2021, the percentage of women in the Indian Army, Indian Air Force and Indian Navy is 0.56%, 1.08% and 6.5%, respectively. Militaries the world over are masculinist organisations, and the culture is set in a way that makes the integration of women replete with challenges. Feminist Scholars have highlighted how if attention is not paid to the discursive and performative elements of gender dichotomies, the discursive structures of gender subordination remain even in a gender-integrated military (Sjoberg 2007). Hence it is crucial to pay attention to these discursive elements and language used in official and unofficial settings.

On the Official Website of the Indian Army, The page elaborating on the Ethos of the Indian Army reflects its hypermasculine culture and erasure of women officers who have been a part of the Indian Army since 1992. The website defines the spirit of the Indian Army as 'the spirit of comradeship and brotherhood of the brave, regardless of caste, creed or religion. The motto is, "One for all and all for one"!'. The list of values is summed up in the following words,

These values stoke the attitude of Service before Self in every soldier. The famous credo of Chetwode Hall is deeply imbibed in the men in Olive Green. It is the spirit of this credo, imbibed in every officer that binds him with his men in an unshakeable bond of camaraderie.

This notion of camaraderie based on the idea of brotherhood ultimately makes the women officers outsiders. Masculinities win the discursive contests and perpetuate the symbolic order by discursive validation (Sjoberg 2007). The narratives and language of the military have not changed much at the core level. Women are not soldiers but women soldiers; their gender marks their identity on the battlefield (Sjoberg, 2007).

Being a women soldier amidst the "Brotherhood" of the military brings forth various challenges for Women officers. Unless the underlying gender discourse is questioned, the othering of women officers is bound to continue. The arguments presented by the MoD against providing permanent commission to women in the Indian Army provide interesting insights into how women officers are considered relevant for specific tasks only in the Army. As MoD made the argument that Short Service Commission SSC women officers can be "utilised" by training them in specialised fields such as 'language interpreters', 'imagery interpreters' and 'cyber and information technology'. The reference to challenges due to adverse conditions of service, which include an 'absence of privacy' in field and insurgency areas, 'maternity issues' and 'child care' (The Secretary, Ministry of Defence vs Babita Puniya & Others 2020) showcase deep-seated stereotypes regarding gender roles, where women officers are argued to be more apt for domains like language, cyber and IT. The Indian military cannot aim for a gender-integrated military without looking into these aspects.

Gender equality is not just about having more women but understanding how gender operates at the various levels in the military, from recruitment to training. To understand the role and participation of women in the Indian military, we need to ask questions like how does gender operate in the Indian military? What are the gender expectations and portrayal regarding femininities and masculinities in the Indian military? How is the contribution of women officers marginalised in the Indian military due to its masculine character? How does this further impact the prospects of integration and progression of women in the military?

A gendered analysis of the Indian military can provide insights into how gender plays a vital role in sustaining and maintaining the institution that is the Indian military. Focus on femininities and masculinities tells us how gender is shaped by the military and shapes the military. The impediments to women's integration in the Indian military are rooted in gender biases and specific constructs of femininities and masculinities. Analysing them requires a look at the current state and the history of the Indian military and women's association and participation in the Indian military, along with the discursive elements of the it as an institution. This could provide newer entry points for women and a

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gender-integrated military.

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