

Masculinity and Its Impact on Gender Differences in Armed Forces

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Abstract- Traditionally, the Indian Armed Forces have been the sole realm of men. Due to the changing societal trends and increasing complexity of military roles, women have been inducted into the Indian Armed Forces since 1992 and Permanent Commission was granted to them in 2008. Since war is viewed to be fought by men, the essential “masculinity” of the Army has been maintained by assigning them support roles. Their entrance is perceived as a threat to the hegemonic masculinity as they are likely to feminize the organization and effeminate the sturdy men. They have not been assigned operational roles. They serve in traditional feminine roles that are administrative and secretarial, like that of social workers, nurses and teachers. Women in combat roles have been perceived as hindering the military gender system and damaging the efficiency of the war machine. To ensure the integration of women in mainstream service life, the paper offers certain suggestions like, completely integrating the training of women with male cadets. The duration and content of training has to be increased so as to help them achieve the required physical standards necessary for a military career. The physical standards have to be toughened. They should be provided with equal accommodation as men. They have to be inducted across all ranks, especially at the lower rungs.

Index Terms- Armed Forces, Gender, Masculinity, Military roles

I. INTRODUCTION

Army is regarded as a male domain and combat the most masculine of all aspects of war. It has been asserted by most males that fighting is a man’s job and should remain so. The intrusion of women in the Army seems threatening. A consensus seems to exist among feminist thinkers, however, that women in military should be offered an expanded set of military roles, including combat. Indian society is basically patriarchal where there are culturally assigned subordinate positions. Hence, women performing a masculine function are not accepted easily.

Traditionally, the Indian Armed Forces have been the sole realm of men. In keeping with the changing societal trends and increasing complexity of military roles, women have been inducted into the Indian Armed Forces since 1992. Permanent Commission to women was granted by Indian Army in 2008. Prior to this they were employed on a short service basis, ranging from 5 to 14 years. As a result they could not rise above the rank of Lt Col. Despite the fact that now they reach the Lt Gen level, they have not been assigned operational roles. In the non-combat fields women have served in medical, engineering, ordinance, signal field and the like but they are not allowed to fly fighter planes or serve on the warships. At present, women constitute 2.5 to 7% of the officer cadre. There are 1,100 women officers in the Army out of 35,377, 750 out of 10,760 officers in Indian Air Force and 300 women out of 7,394 in Navy (Chowdhry, 2018). Persons below officer rank (PBORs) comprise only men. Reasons for protests against women in combat range from lowering of physical standards, adjustment of work culture norms suitable to women, and refusal to take orders from female officers, to tensions, courtships, jealousies, favouritism and the like.

The entrance of women officers in the Army is perceived as a threat to the hegemonic masculinity as they are likely to feminize the organization and effeminate the sturdy men. Women are seen as out of place and defying themselves. Men, in fact, are averse to malitisation of femininity.

II. Combat Role in Military and its relation with masculinity

Combat is a defining role and enjoys the highest symbolic status. Combatants are remembered in war memorials and in folk tales of valour and bravery. Women can do a lot many jobs in Army except combat. In gender differences with respect to combat-noncombat dichotomy, objective difficulties have been cited as reasons for incorporating women in combat roles. The essential “male character” of the Army has been maintained by assigning them support roles. It also reinforces the gender divide that exists in civilian society.

One of the major defining characteristic of Indian soldier is “comradeship and brotherhood”. Introduction of women is likely to disturb this all-male homosocial grouping, gender identity, cultural adaptation and standards of honour upheld by men (Chowdhry, 2018). The soldiers use “coarse language and “swear words”. Army men show an obsession for sexual banter and humor. They say that they do so as most of them are not staying with their families. Since they are deprived of the social and emotional outlet, they take recourse to such devices. Despite women entering the foray, they insist on being sexist and say that “if women have been allowed in, let them adjust to the existing patterns of our behavior. Why should we change?”

Attitudes toward women in military are strongly influenced by attitude toward gender equality, attitude towards military force about political ideology. The many cases of sexual harassment in Army which have been reported by lady officers shows that army is often used as an instrument of gender regulation which feminises women as sexual object and masculinises men as sexual subjects. It reinforces the cultural supremacy of men and masculinity and the cultural subordination and inferiority of women and femininity.

III. Women in Armed Forces: Historical Background

When discussing the history of women in combat, we are reminded of Joan of Arc, who in 1429, at age 17, successfully led French troops into battle against the English. The name of Rani Jhansi of India is no exception. The phenomenon of women in combat is not confined to this century. Many women disguised themselves as men to join the British Army or Navy or the forces of other nations. The French conquests in Africa were delayed by native women who would attack riflemen with swords and spears. Although there have always been a handful of women warriors in every culture, very few cultures have easily accepted women fighting as equal to men. It is only in emergency that women are deployed in combat roles. After the emergency is over, remaining in such a role again becomes confined to men.

A world scan shows that in the Australian Defence Forces women are not permitted to serve in positions involving direct combat. In British Armed Forces women are excluded from duties which require battling enemy at close quarters. In Bulgaria there are equal training standards and equal professional rights for women as men. In the Canadian Armed Forces, women serve as submariners, clearance drivers and even command infantry units.

In Denmark there are different physical requirements laid down for women and men in the Armed Forces. In Finland, females serve under the same conditions as men and all duties in performing operations are open to women. Germany conducts special courses in operating and in fighting sexual harassment. Women serve in combat positions in the artillery, frontier guards and on Navy ships. Combat duty is voluntary for woman in Israel.

In New Zealand, women are able to serve in the special Air Service infantry, armoured and artillery whereas in the Communist Party of Nepal, there is a female participation quota for the combat forces. In Russia, women represent 10% of military strength as combat soldiers. In Sweden, there are no gender restrictions on access to military training or positions. In US Army, women can serve on combat ships but they are not permitted to serve on submarines or Special Forces programs barred from serving in Infantry, Special Operations, Artillery, Armour, and forward Air Defence.

Thus, although women are recruited to serve in the military in most countries, only a few countries permit women to fill active combat roles. Countries that allow this include Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Norway and Switzerland. Israel and Britain allow women to serve in artillery roles, while still excluding them from units with a dedicated infantry role.

IV. Women soldiers in Masculine Roles

Militarism is not gender blind. The relationship between militarism and patriarchal masculinity is characterized by mutual interests because of the great significance of combat in the construction of masculine identities and in the justification of masculine superiority (Enloe, 1988). As Israeli put it, "the military identifies the gender distinctions and then uses them as justifications for both their construction in the first place and for sustaining gender inequality (1997, p.122).

Women in combat roles have been perceived as hindering the military gender system and damaging the efficiency of the war machine (Mitchell, 1989). The contemporary debate on women in the military is at macro level, ignoring the subjective experiences of women soldiers (Connell, 1990).

Women's integration into combat roles should neither challenge the male hegemony in the military nor threaten the ideology that links masculinity and combat and therefore contributes to the legitimization of Indian militarism and its gender regime without altering women's lower civil status. Indian Army is still a male dominated territory where masculinity is the norm. Even in conscript Armies women are exempted from combat roles. They serve in traditional feminine roles that are administrative and secretarial, like that of social workers, nurses and teachers.

V. Identity Practices of Women Soldiers in Masculine Roles

Women who are in military are in an ambivalent role. They hold the most prestigious roles for women soldiers, yet are bounded by the military's structure, culture and policies. They regard their roles as a basis for their personal growth and empowerment through three related practices:

- a. Mimicry of combat soldiers' bodily and discursive practices: when women try to behave like males, they participate in a drag show that ridicules the idea of gender as inner constant identity. They start walking like a male, conceal their femininity by not wearing jewellery or makeup. This is usually a reaction to the mockery by male soldiers. These are mostly temporary gender identities.
- b. Distancing from traditional femininity: Women soldiers identify with the military masculinist ideology and express anti-feminine attitudes. They differentiate from other women in order to construct a positive self-perception (Fanon, 1963). The traditional woman is the "other" against whom they construct their identity.
- c. Trivialization of sexual harassment: Despite being victims of sexual harassment, very few report it. Sexual harassment is a way of reinforcing male power over women (Farley, 1978). An insulted and hurt reaction would confirm the discourse that

the harassment itself is trying to create, which constitutes women as sexual objects. Thus by ignoring the insult, women do not allow harassment to attain its intended exclusionary power.

VI. Essential Pre-requisites for Smooth Induction of Women

The views of four categories of people, viz. women officers themselves, their commanding officers, colleague male officers and the soldiers should be seriously considered while preparing policies to address their concerns.

Women officers: Most of the women officers once selected do not want to be provided with preferential treatment as compared to their male counterparts, be it the selection criteria, training standards or work schedules. Due to the soft upbringing, military life comes as a shock to many when they join initially. In addition, identity problem also arises, causing a distress to many. They have to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of a mother and a housewife too.

Commanding Officers: It is the prime duty of commanding officer to induct and train the lady officer once she is commissioned to his unit. Safety and dignity of the lady officer is of prime importance. Moreover, she has to be engaged in duties like visiting the barracks of troops at midnight to ensure the alertness of troops. Assigning such duties to a lady officer is regarded as impossible. In turn, this duty has to be undertaken by their male counterparts. The physical fitness of the ladies is also a point of concern for some of the commanding officers.

Male Colleagues: Want their counterparts to perform their roles and responsibilities to the fullest. They are not in favour of the preferential treatment that is accorded to lady officers once they have joined the armed forces. Many of the peace postings are also held by lady officers which prevents the male counterparts from enjoying the benefits that are due for them.

Soldiers: Usually feel that fighting is a man's job and can never be performed by ladies. They feel that "An officer, who cannot run with us, cannot train with us and cannot exercise with us can barely be expected to lead us". This biased attitude that is strongly ingrained in them has to change.

VII. Suggested Measures

To ensure the integration of women in mainstream service life, the armed forces have to institute certain measures that will ultimately help to formulate policy directives that will further lead to equality and empowerment of women (Misra & Kumar, 2007). Some of the measures are suggested as under.

- 1 Training is a very important and vital phase in a soldier's life as it is here that she is initiated into the military ethos and value systems. Men and women have common training goals. Problems of integration arise mainly due to the attitudes and perceptions of both the sexes as well as due to the inherent differences between them. The Army conducts its pre-commission training for Short Service Commission (SSC) officers at Officers' Training Academy (OTA), Chennai. When Indian women were initially inducted into armed forces, they were treading on unfamiliar grounds and given the conservative backdrop of the armed forces. A cautious approach was therefore adopted and the academy did not completely integrate the training of women with male cadets. Living areas were segregated, physical standards lowered and service subjects and outdoor exercises were modified to accommodate them. These concessions, coupled with a biased attitude of men have resulted in a number of integration issues that need to be resolved. The duration of training is 24 weeks for women SSC as compared to 44 weeks for men. The period is too short to achieve the required physical standards necessary for a military career. The army should make the duration of training at par with male SSC entry. However, the same has been taken into consideration for the women CDSE entry wherein their training period has been equated with that of men.
- 2 The basic unit of all training activities is a platoon in the Army. To foster a spirit of cohesiveness, cadets are housed as per their platoons. Women are organized in separate platoons from men. At present, there are two platoons which together make a company. The women's training is thus integrated with men only at the battalion level. Mixed contingents need to be there, where the physical training, weapon training and drill are common for men and women.
- 3 The different standards laid down for men and women have to be dissolved. The physical efficiency test for ladies, like the tests of endurance, the battle physical efficiency test and other difficult tests such as chin-ups and toe-touches are also not applicable for lady cadets. The physical standards have to be toughened; otherwise they will never be judged as equals in the Academy. The differences between men and women can be mitigated by gender-norming, as is the practice in US and other Armies. The tests remain the same, only the scores and requirements are lowered. The standards need to be compared with the standards of other countries and scope for improvement needs to be looked into.
- 4 Women are perceived as intruders in a domain that is meant exclusively for men. Since their presence cannot be wished away, rituals have been organized by training academies to keep them away. At OTA, women are never seen as equal by the males. Senior cadets forbid juniors from wishing them in respectful terms. The academy should foster an atmosphere where sexist remarks are not tolerated. Ladies should be provided with equal accommodation as men
- 5 To make a successful start, it is very essential to induct women across all ranks, especially at the lower rung. This is likely to solve many other associated problems related with the prejudiced attitude harbored by men regarding lady officers.

- 6 We can attribute part of resentment to service officers. Due to their undue small numbers, their activities are under constant scrutiny and even minor achievements or aberrations get highlighted.
- 7 Men and women can benefit and learn more from each other if they are trained together so that perception of double standards melts away. The issue of opening combat roles to women in India is a little premature as they have yet to receive equal opportunities even in support roles. The debate is restricted to the realms of theory as there is no practical knowledge on this issue as such. It is imperative to address these issues right from the time of selection and training to ensure that women become valuable resources of the armed forces. One can form mahila battalions in every regiment and thereafter slowly induct them in combat situations.

VIII. Conclusion

In India the socio-cultural norms are still sexually polarized and segregated. In a country like ours, can close physical contact between the opposite sexes be tolerated? Are women prepared to share barracks with an all male troop?

Indian women have to become liberated so as to be recruited in the Army in combat positions. Difficult it may sound but is not impossible. Our society and its norms as well as the socialization practices from early childhood need to be gender neutral. The relationship between the Army and society should be friendlier. Adopting masculine combat norms must ensure the woman a hegemonic status of a combat soldier. She should be entitled to the same economic privileges as combat soldiers. Women need to be perceived with respect and equality so that more number of women gear up for adopting the combat role with pride.

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