

Women in Armed Forces: Global and Indian Perspectives

Captain Meera Siddhartha Dave

Research scholar,

Department of HRD,

Veer Narmad South Gujarat University.Surat.

Email:- meerad14@gmail.com



Abstract:

The role of women in armed forces has historically been overlooked despite their significant contributions in both combat and non-combat roles. From legendary warriors like Rani Lakshmibai to modern-day officers leading battalions, women have demonstrated resilience, leadership, and adaptability in military contexts. This paper critically examines the historical trajectory and contemporary status of women in armed forces globally and in India. Drawing upon comparative perspectives, the study highlights the socio-political dynamics that shaped women's participation, from their active combat roles during World Wars to institutionalized restrictions in peacetime. In India, landmark judicial pronouncements and policy reforms in recent years have further transformed gender inclusion in the military. The research underscores how women's participation remains conditional on national crises, socio-cultural attitudes, and institutional frameworks, and advocates for structural reforms ensuring parity.

Introduction:

The history of warfare and military institutions has been overwhelmingly documented through the lens of male heroism, battles, treaties, and conquests, leaving women's contributions marginally recorded (Macdonald, Ardener, & Holden, 1987). Yet, women's presence in armed forces—whether as combatants, support staff, or leaders—has shaped military outcomes across centuries. Harriet Beecher Stowe's assertion that “women who express themselves are the ones who lead change” resonates powerfully in the context of women in the armed forces, where visibility and recognition have often been denied.

In India, figures like Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi and Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal of the Indian National Army exemplify the historic continuity of women taking on military responsibilities (Bhattacharyya, 2012). Globally, women's roles have evolved unevenly—expanding during emergencies such as the World Wars and then contracting during peacetime (Fenner, 1998; Segal, 1995). From Mariya Bochkareva's “Battalion of Death” in the USSR to the large-scale integration of women into the U.S. and British forces during World War II (Goldman, 1973; Campbell, 1990; Carreiras, 2012), their participation has demonstrated both necessity and competence.

Despite these contributions, systemic barriers such as exclusionary policies, stereotypes, and structural biases have continued to restrict women's military careers (Holm, 1982; Carreiras, 2004). Recent decades, however, mark a paradigm shift: women increasingly enter armed forces under equal terms, participate in command roles, and even assume leadership positions. In India, judicial interventions such as *Kush Kalra v. Union of India*

(2020) and the Supreme Court's ruling on permanent commission for women officers (BBC News, 2020) reflect a significant reconfiguration of gender inclusion in military service.

This paper seeks to situate women's military participation in a dual framework—global experiences and Indian trajectories—highlighting both the structural challenges and the opportunities for reform. By doing so, it contributes to understanding gendered military history and contemporary human resource policies in defense organizations.

Methodology

This research adopts a **qualitative and historical-comparative methodology** to examine the participation of women in armed forces globally and in India. The study relies on secondary data from academic journals, historical records, government reports, and policy documents.

Key steps included:

1. **Historical Analysis:** Tracing women's participation from ancient to modern contexts, with a focus on shifts during major conflicts such as World War I, World War II, and post-Cold War military reforms.
2. **Comparative Framework:** A cross-national perspective was employed to highlight variations in women's military participation across regions such as Europe, the United States, the Soviet Union, and India. This allowed for identification of common themes—conditional inclusion during crises, marginalization during peacetime, and recent movements towards parity.
3. **Thematic Categorization:** Sources were organized under themes including:
 - **Combat Participation** (e.g., Soviet "Battalion of Death," Indian National Army's Rani of Jhansi Regiment).
 - **Auxiliary and Support Roles** (e.g., U.S. Women's Army Corps, British Nursing Corps).
 - **Policy and Legal Reforms** (e.g., Supreme Court judgments in India, NATO integration policies).
 - **Cultural and Institutional Barriers** (stereotypes, exclusionary laws, gendered command structures).
4. **Critical Textual Analysis:** Key works such as Carreiras (2004), Holm (1982), and Segal (1995) were examined to evaluate how scholarly debates have framed women's inclusion—as revolutionary, transformative, or temporary responses to crises.

The methodology prioritizes breadth across historical and contemporary sources rather than primary data collection, as the aim is to synthesize knowledge for policy and academic insights.

Discussion

The findings from historical and comparative analysis reveal **three major patterns** in the trajectory of women in armed forces:

1. Conditional Participation in Times of Crisis

Globally, women's inclusion has been most visible during wartime emergencies. From the Soviet Union's all-women combat battalions (Carreiras, 2012) to the U.S. employing 350,000 women during World War II without granting them official military status (National Museum of American History, 2024), women's involvement has been treated as a temporary necessity rather than a long-term structural change. This conditionality reinforces the argument by Fenner (1998) and Segal (1995) that institutional memory of women's contributions fades once the emergency ends.

2. Persistent Structural and Cultural Barriers

Despite policy advances, cultural stereotypes remain a significant barrier. In India, arguments that "male troops won't accept women commanders" (The Times of India, 2020) illustrate how deep-rooted gender norms obstruct institutional reform. Similar resistance has been recorded across NATO countries (Carreiras, 2004). Even landmark judgments like the Indian Supreme Court's 2020 ruling on permanent commission for women (BBC News, 2020) face challenges in implementation due to entrenched biases.

3. Emerging Paradigm of Equality

Recent decades indicate a **paradigm shift**. The professionalization of volunteer armies, technological modernization reducing physical barriers, and global gender equality movements have redefined women's roles (Holm, 1982; Carreiras, 2004). In India, milestones such as Maj Gen Madhuri Kanitkar's promotion to Lt Gen rank (Mascarenhas, 2020) symbolize this transformation. Judicial activism, coupled with policy reforms by the Ministry of Defence (2020), suggests a trajectory toward structural parity, though progress is uneven and contested.

Implications for Human Resources Development

From an HRD perspective, women's inclusion is not merely about gender equality but about **optimizing organizational effectiveness** in modern armed forces. Research demonstrates that diverse leadership enhances morale, cohesion, and performance (Harrell & Miller, 1997). For India, this implies:

- Institutionalizing **gender-sensitive HR policies** in recruitment, training, and promotion.
- Addressing **stereotype threats** through education and cultural orientation within military academies.
- Creating **supportive ecosystems** for women in combat and command roles, including infrastructural changes and mentorship programs.

Women in Armed Forces: Global Perspectives

Women's involvement in warfare has been cyclical, intensifying during crises and receding during peacetime. In Early Modern Europe, women were indispensable to armies in logistical and auxiliary roles, though later excluded as militaries professionalized (Hacker, 2018). By the 18th and early 19th centuries, systematic exclusion marginalized women, confining them to roles like nursing (Macdonald et al., 1987).

World War I marked a turning point with Britain's Army Nursing Service (1881) expanding opportunities, and the Soviet Union forming all-female combat units (Carreiras, 2012). World War II significantly amplified women's roles: 350,000 served in the U.S. military without official status (National Museum of American History, 2024), while 450,000 joined in Britain, comprising nearly 10 percent of the armed forces (Campbell, 1990). Nations like Germany, the USSR, and Israel went further by drafting women, illustrating necessity-driven mobilization (Goldman, 1973).

Yet, after wars, institutional memory faded, and exclusionary laws returned (Segal, 1995). Fenner (1998) emphasizes how wartime narratives of inclusion are selectively remembered and forgotten, depending on strategic needs. This cycle illustrates the conditionality of women's military roles, shaped by political, technological, and cultural dynamics (Pinch, 2006).

Recent decades mark a break from this trend. With volunteer armies and advanced technologies reducing brute force requirements, integration has accelerated. Carreiras (2004) and Holm (1982) describe this transformation as a revolution—threatening traditional hierarchies but creating pathways for parity.

Women in Armed Forces: Indian Perspectives

India's military traditions hold a long legacy of women in combat, from mythological figures to historic warriors. Modern inclusion began with the Indian National Army's Rani of Jhansi Regiment led by Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal (Bhattacharyya, 2012). Post-independence,

however, women's roles were limited mainly to medical services until gradual reforms expanded opportunities (Ministry of Defence, 2020).

Judicial and policy interventions have been pivotal. The Supreme Court's ruling in 2020 granting permanent commissions to women officers in the Indian Army was hailed as a landmark against entrenched stereotypes (BBC News, 2020; Vaidyanathan & Som, 2020). The *Kush Kalra v. Union of India* (2020) case further strengthened pathways for women's entry into premier academies.

Despite such progress, cultural and institutional challenges remain. Arguments citing "male troops' resistance" to women commanders (The Times of India, 2020) and limited policy reforms (The Tribune, 2020) highlight enduring gender biases. Scholars like Sharma (2022) argue that stereotypes surrounding physical capacity and leadership suitability continue to obstruct women's full integration.

Nevertheless, milestones such as Maj Gen Madhuri Kanitkar becoming India's third woman Lieutenant General (Mascarenhas, 2020), and the expansion of women into combat aviation and command roles, signal structural change. Global experiences suggest that India's trajectory mirrors patterns of conditional inclusion but is increasingly shaped by constitutional guarantees of equality and judicial activism.

Conclusion

The history of women in armed forces globally and in India reveals a paradox: while their presence has been indispensable during crises, structural barriers have consistently limited long-term inclusion. Recent reforms, both internationally and in India, reflect a paradigmatic shift towards gender parity. Yet, this shift requires sustained institutional commitment, cultural change, and policy innovation. Recognizing women not merely as auxiliary participants but as integral to defense human resource systems is essential for building modern, inclusive, and effective armed forces.

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