

MARCHING BEYOND THE MARGINS

Advancing Women's Meaningful Participation in the Indian Army



LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADF- Australian Defense Forces
AHRC- Australian Human Rights Commission
CASO- Cordon and Search Operations
CDP Chief of Defense People
CI- Counter Insurgency
CT- Counter Terrorism
DGI- Directorate of Gender Integration
EIF- Elsie Initiative Fund
FPU- Formed Police Unit
HADR- Humanitarian and Disaster Relief
HQ IDS- Headquarters Integrated Defense Staff
ICC- Internal Complaints Committee
MFP- Military Gender Focal Point
MGA- Military Gender Advisor
MONUSCO- Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
NDA- National Defense Academy
OR- Other Rank
PBORs- Personnel below Officer Rank
PME- Professional Military Education
POSH Act- Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act
SOP- Standard Operating Procedure
SSC- Short Service Commission
TPCC- Troop and Police Contributing Country
UNIFIL- United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNISFA- United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei

Recommended citation:

Khillare, Tishya (2025). *Marching Beyond the Margins: Advancing Women's Meaningful Participation in the Indian Army*. New Delhi: Council for Strategic and Defense Research.

The Council for Strategic and Defense Research (CSDR) does not take institutional positions on any issues.

© 2025 Council for Strategic and Defense Research

C-21, 3rd Floor, Qutub Institutional Area, New Delhi, India - 110016.

Phone: 011-43104566 | Email: office@csdronline.org | Web: www.csdronline.org | Twitter: [@CSDR_India](https://twitter.com/CSDR_India)

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report examines the critical need for systematic gender integration in India's largest military service, the Indian Army. It explored the current state of women's participation in the Indian Army, where fewer than 7,054 women serve among nearly 1.2 million personnel, representing less than 1% of the total strength. The report presents a roadmap for transforming piecemeal, reactive policies into a coordinated, gender-informed approach that benefits both military effectiveness and national security. Drawing on international best practices from armies in Canada, Australia, and the UK, the report outlines institutional and cultural reforms necessary for meaningful change. Key recommendations include establishing civilian-military partnerships, conducting comprehensive status assessments, developing strategic implementation plans, and creating dedicated gender integration departments. The report emphasizes that increasing women's participation requires sustained political will, parliamentary oversight, and collaboration with gender-competent civil society organizations to ensure reforms address structural barriers while maintaining operational effectiveness.

ABOUT CSDR'S INCLUSIVE FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY PROGRAM

CSDR's Inclusive and Foreign Security Policy Program aims to promote gender-sensitive and inclusive paradigms in foreign policy and security. It integrates intersectional and inclusive perspectives into foreign and security policies to drive improvements in security outcomes while fostering sustainable peace, development, and prosperity. The program focuses on two key areas: Feminist Foreign Policy and Gender, Peace, and Security. These reforms aim to enhance women's meaningful participation in India's security sector, peacekeeping forces, as well as Track 1.5 and Track II Dialogues.

ABOUT COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC AND DEFENSE RESEARCH

Founded in January 2020 by Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda (Retd.) and Dr. Happyman Jacob, CSDR is an innovative think tank and consultancy specializing in foreign policy, geopolitical risk, connectivity, and critical areas of defense and aerospace. With a focus on the Indian subcontinent, Eurasia, and the Indo-Pacific, CSDR is committed to generating strategic insights that drive meaningful change. Read more at www.csdronline.com

AUTHOR

Dr. Tishya Khillare - Fellow, CSDR

RESEARCH DIRECTION

Lt Gen D S Hooda (Retd) - Co-founder, CSDR

Executive Summary

- The Indian Army, as the nation's foremost defense institution, stands at a pivotal juncture in its long and complex journey of gender integration. While women have served in its ranks since 1958, their participation remains disproportionately low, comprising less than 1% of total strength and less than 4% of the officer cadre. Despite recent policy milestones like the grant of Permanent Commission, the opening of the National Defence Academy to women, and limited recruitment through the Agnipath scheme- the progress is piecemeal, reactive, and insufficiently transformative. These fragmented reforms, often undertaken in response to judicial directives, do not sufficiently remove institutional inequities rather than dismantling them.
- This report argues that increasing women's meaningful participation i.e. participation that provides equitable access, empowered roles, leadership opportunities, and safe workplaces- requires a whole-of-system approach. The rationale for such reform is grounded in India's constitutional commitment to equality, as well as the operational, strategic, and societal imperatives of a modernizing Army. International evidence shows that meaningful integration enhances military effectiveness, impacts unit cohesion through competence rather than gender, and provides socio-cultural advantages in operations that demand community trust and legitimacy.
- As one of India's largest employers and a leading Troop Contributing Country to UN peace operations, the Army cannot afford to restrict women's meaningful participation without risking reputational costs. In counterinsurgency contexts, humanitarian response, and peacekeeping deployments, women's participation enhances civilian protection, intelligence gathering, and community engagement- areas crucial for India, both globally and domestically.
- To defuse confusion and hesitation on policy changes needed to further women's participation- meaningfully, this report lays out the building blocks of gender reforms for the Indian Army. It emphasizes the need for: political will and parliamentary oversight; civil-military collaboration which brings on board gender expertise; comprehensive assessments of women's status in service; and a strategic, evidence-based implementation plan with clear timelines, budgets, and accountability mechanisms. It also outlines reform options for the Army both institutional reforms- in manpower planning, recruitment, HR policy, career advancement, and accountability, and cultural reforms that address entrenched patriarchal norms, promote gender-sensitive training, and foster leadership attuned to the demands of mixed-gender forces.
- Ultimately, increasing women's meaningful participation is not an act of accommodation but of transformation. It is an institutional imperative that aligns the Army with India's democratic values, enhances its operational readiness, and strengthens its role as a credible, progressive actor in both national security and global peacekeeping. Success requires sustained commitment from both civilian and military leadership, recognizing the Army as a multifaceted institution that requires diverse skills, which are better fulfilled by a diverse force. As Major Radhika Sen observed, "Gender equality can be achieved when all of us work together."

Key Concepts

Caring Responsibility: Caring responsibilities involve primarily caring for children, the elderly, partners, as well as the day-to-day management of household duties that are undertaken with the primary intention of providing care to all members of a family unit. In the Indian context, caring responsibilities may be referred to as family responsibilities in everyday parlance.

Gender Discrimination at Work: Unfair or prejudicial distinction, exclusion or restriction made based on Gender which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women of their complete professional potential.

Gender Equality: The concept that women and men have equal conditions, treatment, and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) opportunities. Gender equality is, therefore, the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. (Adapted from UNICEF Glossary of Terms and Concepts).

Gender Equity: The Process of achieving gender equality through fair and impartial means.

Gender Integration: An organization's strategy of embedding gender equality into all its initiatives and programs to achieve decent work for all by analyzing and addressing the specific needs of both women and men (adapted from ILO's Guidance Note on Integrating Gender).

Gender Neutral/Gender Blind: Anything – a concept, an entity, a style of language – that is un-associated with either the male or female gender. The nature of systemic and embedded or internalized bias is such that, unfortunately, often, policy that is perceived to be gender neutral is in fact gender blind (Adapted from UNICEF Glossary of Terms and Concepts).

Gender-informed/Gender sensitive: Taking into account the differential impact of organizational policies, rules, and initiatives on men and women, and trying to mitigate the negative consequences thereof (adapted from the Glossary- 'Gender Terms Explained' by United Nations).

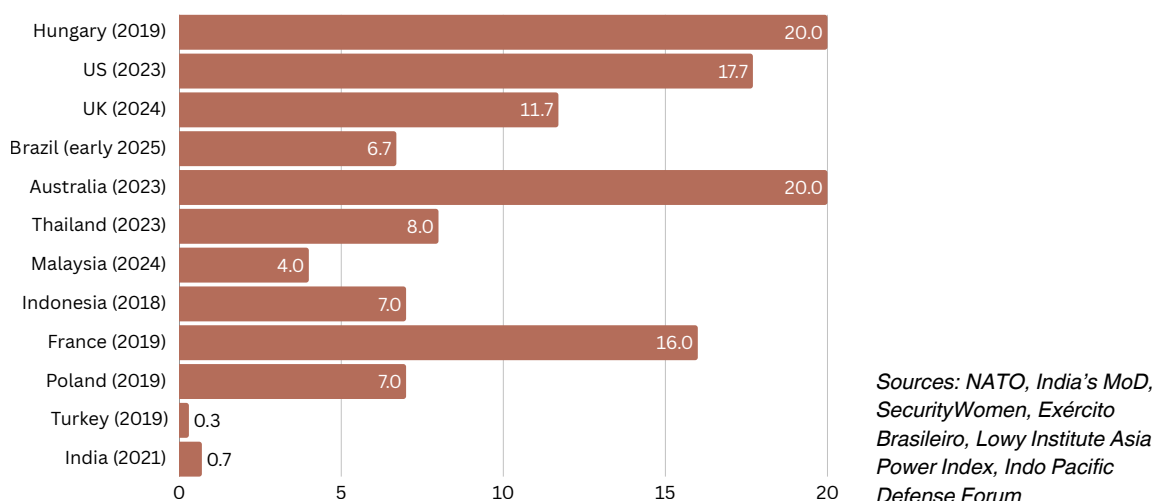
Gender-Responsive: Intentionally employing gender considerations to affect the design, implementation, and results of interventions and policies. This means organizational policies take into account the different needs, roles, situations, and power dynamics of women and men to actively reduce gender-based barriers and promote gender equality.

Meaningful Participation of Women: Women hold positions with genuine influence, contributing their skills and perspectives across roles and ranks, without facing barriers like gender bias, and are provided with equitable opportunities for advancement, training, and leadership.

The Challenge of Increasing Women's Meaningful Participation

In May 2024, in the presence of military experts from around the world, Major Radhika Sen from the Indian Army received the Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award from the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.^[1] Major Sen served as the Commander of an Engagement Platoon at the UN Mission in Congo (MONUSCO) and “led mixed-gender engagement patrols and activities in a volatile environment”.^[2] She is one of only 7054 uniformed women serving in the Indian Army out of almost 1.2 million service members.^[3] Major Sen’s achievements highlight the exceptional service caliber of Indian uniformed women and also invites a long-overdue conclusion: the time has come for the Indian Army to undertake systematic efforts to increase meaningful participation of women.

Share of active duty military personnel which is female in selected countries (in percent)



Despite being the first among India's tri-services to open its ranks to women in 1958, the Army now lags significantly behind the Navy and Air Force in female representation. The total number of personnel in the Army is 12.48 lakhs,^[4] and the total strength of women in 2023 was just over 7000, which is less than 1% of the total strength. The percentages are somewhat higher amongst officer cadres as the Indian army largely integrates women in these ranks and not as soldiers/ Personnel below Officer Ranks (PBORs).^[5]

According to the last publicly available statistics on the percentage of women in the three services, women officers comprise less than 4% of the Army officer cadre, compared to 6% in the Navy and 13% in the Air Force.^[6] There are service-specific disparities in both numbers and integration levels, reflecting unique institutional challenges within each service. In this report, we choose to focus exclusively on enhancing the meaningful participation of women in the Indian Army.

This report shows how increasing women's meaningful participation, as both officers and PBORs in the Indian Army, benefits the military and Indian society. This change can happen through stronger partnerships between civilian and military institutions in a planned, systematic, and gender-informed manner, rather than through rushed responses to legal directives. The report warns against taking a piecemeal approach that

ignores gender considerations, as this can create serious human resource problems down the line. The report outlines the policy changes needed to do this effectively. It concludes that by increasing women's meaningful participation, the Indian Army can offer more effective contributions to India's national security needs and India's internationally laudable contributions to peacekeeping.

Held strength of uniformed women in the Indian Armed Forces as of August 2023

CATEGORY	HELD STRENGTH OF WOMEN
ARMY	
Women Officers in Army (Excluding Army Medical Corps (AMC)/ Army Dental Corps (ADC)	1,733
Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs)	0
Other Ranks	100
NAVY	
Women Officers (Excluding Medical & Dental officers)	580
Sailors (Agniveer)	726
AIRFORCE	
Women Officers (Excluding Medical & Dental branches)	1654
Airmen (Agniveervayu)	155
MEDICAL & DENTAL BRANCHES	
Army Medical Corps (AMC)	1212
Army Dental Corps (ADC)	168
Military Nursing Service (MNS)	3841
Medical Corps (Navy)	151
Dental Corps (Navy)	10
Nursing Service (Navy)	380
Medical Corps (Airforce)	274
Dental Corps (Airforce)	5
Nursing Service (Airforce)	425
Total	11,414

Source: Ministry of Defense, Govt of India.

Progress So Far and Prevailing Limitations

In India, women's participation in the Armed Forces began when the Army allowed their recruitment in 1958 into the Medical Corps.^[7] Their participation remained restricted to medical services until the 1990s. It was only in 1992 that the Indian Army allowed women to be commissioned in Officer ranks in non-medical roles, but restricted them to Short Service Commissions (SSC).^[8]

Over the years, women officers have been inducted into a variety of roles, including the Regiment of Artillery, the Corps of Signals, Engineers, Army Aviation, Army Air Defense, Electronics and Mechanical Engineers, the Army Service Corps, the Army Ordnance Corps, and Military Intelligence. In 2021, the Army began granting permanent service commissions to women.^[9] Today, women officers can join almost all branches of the Indian Army except the Infantry, Armored Corps, and Special Forces, i.e., combat-focused branches. Even then, their numbers remain extremely low.

Importantly, this long-unfolding journey of integration of women has garnered public attention because of three relatively recent policy changes.

- Grant of Permanent Commission to women officers in 2021;
- Opening of the National Defense Academy (NDA) for women candidates in 2022;^[10]
- Enrolment of women recruits in Other Ranks (ORs) in all in Corps of Military Police through the Agnipath Scheme.

Although significant, these changes have limitations, too.

First, on the issue of career progression of women PC officers, following directives from the Supreme Court, the Army adopted the "Future Career Progression Policy for Women Officers" on March 29th, 2024.^[11] However, it has since been challenged by 30 women officers in the Supreme Court on the grounds of "unfair" promotion criteria, which include the requirement for them to "experience operational command of a unit or battalion for a period of nearly 2 years" to understand the "complexities of command".^[12] The women officers contend that this requirement is unfair because it delays their career advancement through no fault of their own. Despite having equal years of service as their male counterparts, they face additional barriers because command roles only became available to women after the Supreme Court's 2020 decision directing the Army to grant them permanent commission.^[13] The Indian Army, on its part, has argued that command experience is crucial for promotions.



In 2021, the Indian Army began granting permanent service commissions to women. Today, women officers can join almost all branches of the Indian Army except the Infantry, Armored Corps, and Special Forces, i.e., combat-focused branches. Even then, their numbers remain extremely low.

Second, with regard to NDA admissions, a total of 19 out of 400 seats were limited for women, the grounds for which have been questioned by the Supreme Court.^[14] In an affidavit submitted to the Supreme Court regarding the limit placed on the intake of women candidates, the Government of India stated that the cut-off was based on “current requirements” of the Armed Forces and that it needs “sufficient time for deliberating implications in the long term for induction and deployment of ex-NDA women cadets in the Indian armed forces”.^[15]

Third, the Indian Army finally opened recruitment for women as PBORs in 2022 through the Agnipath scheme. However, the intake of women has been drastically low when compared to their male counterparts. In July 2024, the Army stated that it had recruited around 1 lakh Agniveers, of whom only 200 are women.^[16] Further, induction of women Agniveers has been limited to the Corps of Military Police only. Finally, women Agniveers also need to be childless to be eligible for enlistment as Agniveers.^[17]



First Batch of Agniveer Women under the new Agnipath Scheme getting training at Corps of Military Police Center and School in 2023.

(Source: DH Photo)

The Indian Army is therefore in a peculiar position where recruitment seems to be advancing, albeit with challenges, primarily amongst the officer cadre, and there remains a concerning absence of women in PBORs across the board.

The Indian Army’s progress on the integration of women is, therefore, a mixed bag. There has been some progress, but it has been too slow, taking more than three decades. To its credit, the Army made important changes recently, as stated above. However, numbers remain low, recruitment is restricted, and as shown above, discriminatory aspects of past and present rules still impact their careers negatively.



Indian Army’s progress on the integration of women is, therefore, a mixed bag. There has been some progress, but it has been too slow, taking more than three decades. To its credit, the Army made important changes recently.

Women's Meaningful Participation in the Army: The Need for a Systematic Approach

Although progressing slowly, integration of women in the Indian Army is piecemeal and reactionary, lacking a whole-of-system approach. The cost to the Army is persistent personnel dissatisfaction and friction, as already proven by the multiple petitions brought to the courts, which further damage the Army's reputation. In contrast, a planned, phased, and whole-of-system approach to gender reforms in the Indian Army would aim to increase women's participation in a way that is meaningful for both the uniformed women and the institution.

The term 'meaningful' is often used to differentiate reforms that are impactful in increasing women's participation in organizations from those that are surface-level or tokenistic. Promoting meaningful participation of women in historically male-dominated institutions and fields of work, such as the armed forces, peace negotiations, peacekeeping, etc., is especially important to establish holistic peace and security. *Meaningful* participation of women in the Armed Forces is established when women:^[18]

- Have equal access as their male colleagues to the same training, promotion, and career advancement opportunities;
- Hold positions that are in line with their training, rank, and area of expertise;
- Are empowered to participate and contribute fully in those roles and ranks;
- Benefit from personnel policies that are responsive to all aspects of their life cycle, rather than policies that only consider the professional and personal needs of their male colleagues;
- Hold leadership positions that empower them with equal decision-making powers as their male colleagues;
- Occupy non-traditional and non-stereotypical roles;
- Have safe workplaces that are free from all forms of harassment, bullying, intimidation, and violence.

Around the world, several armies have increased the meaningful participation of women across roles and ranks. These include countries like Canada,^[19] Australia,^[20] the UK,^[21] Bangladesh,^[22] and Brazil.^[23] These armies have undertaken large-scale institutional transformations to increase the participation of women systematically in all ranks. Their experiences demonstrate that while increasing women's participation in traditionally male-dominated institutions like national armies presents both institutional and socio-cultural challenges, success is achievable. The key lies in civil-military collaboration that takes a systematic, planned, and gender-informed approach to implement these changes.



Around the world, several armies...have undertaken large-scale institutional transformations to increase the participation of women across ranks...The key lies in civil-military collaboration that takes a systematic, planned, and gender-informed approach to implement these changes.

Why Increase Women's Meaningful Participation?

Any fundamental institutional reform must begin with a clear rationale - the "why" behind the change. This rationale should be grounded in values that explain why an institution needs to reform. For the Indian Army, the overarching rationale is alignment with India's foundational democratic values. Specifically, this means upholding the right to equal opportunity in public employment, ensuring all citizens can participate equally in national life. As India's foremost national institution, the Army must reflect these core principles.

As with other freedoms and rights, it is recognized that reasonable exceptions may be warranted in the context of military service. However, confining women's participation solely to officer ranks and limiting their representation to a mere 4% cannot be justified as reasonable. Developing a diverse defense force inspired by this value-based rationale has far-reaching benefits for military effectiveness, national security, security provision to local communities, and India's international standing.



Five women officers commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery for the first time ever, during their passing out parade at OTA, Chennai, on April 29, 2023 | (Source: The Hindu: B. Jothi Ramalingam)

Improved Military Effectiveness

Concerns around the inclusion of women in military roles often center on fears of reduced military effectiveness due to perceived lower physical strength and expected disruptions to unit cohesion caused by the presence of women in mixed-gender units. However, the validity and relevance of these concerns are called into question due to emerging evidence and more nuanced logics around military effectiveness. First, on physical strength, assuming that any deviation from traditionally established standards that were made for men amounts to dilution of effectiveness is an outdated logic. Modernization of equipment and broadened mission requirements have made it possible for many roles to be occupied by trained personnel, male or female, without negatively impacting military effectiveness, especially in combat-support and service arms. For instance, a study conducted on a mixed-gender combat-support unit of the American Army in 1997 found that there were no negative impacts of extended military operations involving women personnel.^[24] In this regard, a modernizing army should update established standards and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to scientifically assess the current soldiering requirements as per role rather than tradition. This was successfully done by the Canadian army, which "threw out all old standards and started anew with a close

look at the actual demands of the job in the field of operations, and then scientifically created standards and testing procedures".^[25] For India, this opens up a larger talent pool to recruit from without impacting operational effectiveness. This is especially crucial as the Army is presently facing a personnel shortfall.^[26]

Second, cohesion is generally considered a crucial factor determining a unit's performance, and it is assumed that the inclusion of women negatively impacts cohesion. The problem with basing policies of professional militaries on such claims is that they are baseless and seriously question the logical soundness of policies adopted by large armies. No supporting evidence for such claims has been found in armies where gender integration has progressed, even in combat arms. In fact, evidence points to the contrary; in a study conducted across multiple armies that have mixed-gender units, it was found that "in today's world of professional armies, it is not gender that determines cohesion, but training and competence".^[27] In the absence of confirming evidence pointing towards disruption of cohesion due to inclusion of women, it can safely be said that such assumptions emanate from gender-biased subjective opinions and cannot be furthered as primary reasons for restricting women's participation.

Third, with respect to modern operations, military effectiveness also means prioritizing civilian protection, intelligence gathering for operational and force protection purposes, community engagement, enhancing operational legitimacy in areas populated with civilians, "winning hearts and minds", and most importantly, strategic forethought, none of these aspects are limited to the male sex, with some roles even offering significant socio-cultural advantages to women.



Cohesion is generally considered a crucial factor determining a unit's performance, and it is assumed that the inclusion of women negatively impacts cohesion...evidence points to the contrary; in a study conducted across multiple armies that have mixed-gender units, it was found that "in today's world of professional armies, it is not gender that determines cohesion, but training and competence".

Managing Conflicts in Areas of Disturbance

India has several internally disturbed areas where the army is engaged in various capacities: reinstating the rule of law, quelling ongoing violence, combating insurgency, conducting counter-terrorism operations, and preventing infiltration. States in the Northeast and the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir are some of the regions with active counterinsurgency (CI) and counter terrorism (CT) operations. What distinguishes the Army's CI/CT role is that it is engaged within friendly territory, and conflicts fall on the low-intensity conflict spectrum. Managing these conflicts involves working with local populations and conducting community outreach initiatives. However, owing to the use of AFSPA,^[28] the army has a strained relationship with local communities in these areas.

Given the close civilian quarters within which the Army operates, establishing meaningful trust with the civilian population is of vital importance. This is necessary for establishing the humane nature of the Army's physical and psychological presence, which improves human intelligence gathering, legitimacy, and efficacy of CI/CT operations. Experiences of UN peacekeeping troops in conflict areas where similar operational demands exist have shown that these roles are better performed by mixed gender units,^[29] given the socio-cultural advantages that women hold in community settings. The following examples from UN peacekeeping missions illustrate this point:

“In the peacekeeping mission in Abyei (UNISFA), an area nestled between Sudan and South Sudan, women peacekeepers were instrumental in building trust with community leaders and women’s groups. This engagement enabled access to new information, which helped UNISFA detect early warnings of attacks and prevent violence”.^[30]

“In the peacekeeping mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) a military unit from Ghana was deployed that is comprised of 20% women. The unit reports a significant increase of trust in UNIFIL and its forces in the communities where they have patrolled, as well as an increase willingness of women to interact with the mission”.^[31]

These are important and directly transferable lessons for India's CI/CT operations. They demonstrate that participation of uniformed women in areas of disturbance can help improve several operational aspects including but not limited to cordon and search operations (CASO), establishing and manning mobile check posts, patrolling, civilian and community engagement, building trust with local populations by engaging with them in local languages, addressing grievances, rebuilding infrastructure, providing medical aid, supporting educational initiatives, and providing training and imparting skills to local youth to help them find employment. Given that there is no evidence that women can't perform many, if not most, of these roles, it is puzzling why the Indian army and special forces would relinquish important operational gains by raising and deploying largely male-only units in these areas?



A woman gestures as she argues with an Indian army member in the village of Gamgiphai, Manipur state, India, August 31, 2011. (Source: Manpreet Romana/The New York Times)

Further, there have been reports of excessive use of force^[32] and sexual violence^[33] perpetrated by security forces in these regions. The perception of male-only units in areas of disturbance against the historic backdrop of gender-based violence perpetrated by their members evokes fear in communities and prevents civilian engagement, which negatively impacts operational efficacy. The “hearts and minds”^[34] and “hand of friendship”^[35] approaches adopted by special forces in these areas cannot be meaningfully implemented without a diverse and humane force, to which meaningful participation of women as both officers and PBORs is central.

Indian Army as an Equal Opportunity Employer

The Indian Army, with over 1.2 million personnel, is widely regarded as a prestigious employer. Taking steps to increase women’s meaningful participation will offer the Indian Army a valuable opportunity to reinforce its identity as a progressive employer, which in recent years has been tarnished by various ongoing cases at the Supreme Court.

Some of the Indian Army’s welfare and HR policies meet international best practices on supporting women in the Armed Forces. For instance, the Army has robust leave policies that include childcare leave, maternity leave, medical termination of pregnancy leave, etc.^[36] The Army also offers opportunities for continued education through its various colleges for Medicine, Engineering, Management, etc.^[37] Interviews with uniformed women show that this is an important factor contributing to their retention, as such high-quality higher education opportunities are very expensive and inaccessible to them outside the Army.

More recently, the widespread admiration for women officers like Colonel Sophia Qureshi and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh, who came to symbolize the strength of Indian women during Operation Sindoor, illustrates the inspirational impact uniformed women have on a nation. Similarly, India’s all-female Formed Police Units (FPUs) deployed to the UN Mission in Liberia received international acclaim and are credited with inspiring many Liberian women to pursue careers in the security sector.^[38]

Increasingly, it has become untenable for India’s largest employer, the Indian Army, to opt out of the right to equal opportunity in public employment for all of India’s citizens. Speaking on the matter, the Supreme Court of India has encouraged the Indian Army to integrate more uniformed women amongst its ranks to enable both Indian men and women to serve as “equal citizens in a common mission”.^[39]



Colonel Sofiya Qureshi of the Indian Army and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh of the Indian Air Force became known faces due to their media briefings during Operation Sindoor in May 2025. Source: Indian Express/Anil Sharma

Providing Diverse Forms of Security to India and its Neighborhood

The Indian army plays a significant role in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), offering protection, relief, recovery, and aid to civilians in the aftermath of disasters. A gender-sensitive approach is essential to this work, as gender intersects with all aspects of disaster management: threat identification, exposure, vulnerability, risk assessment, response, and recovery.

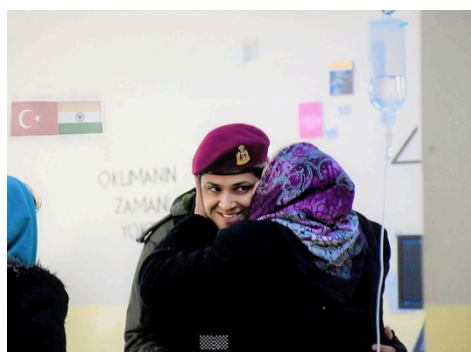
UNDP's study - Disaster Risks and Resilience in India - reveals that nearly half of India's states and union territories face above-moderate levels of gender vulnerability, which means that in more than half of India, women are significantly more vulnerable to the steep impacts of disasters due to existing socio-cultural, biophysical, and economic inequalities. For instance, evidence shows that women and children are 14 times more likely to die in disasters.^[40] Women often receive late warnings, face increased vulnerability to threats like drowning, and suffer post-disaster consequences such as displacement, economic insecurity, and exposure to gender-based violence.

Despite growing recognition, such as the 2009 National Policy on Disaster Management recommendation that women be included in disaster response forces, gender-responsive capacity within institutions like the Indian Army remains limited, particularly due to the slim participation of uniformed women.^[41] India's growing regional role as a 'first responder' in HADR operations also lacks systematic gender mainstreaming. This undermines the effectiveness of interventions and risks gender-blind efforts that exclude women's needs and perspectives.

Strengthening India's gender-responsive HADR capacity requires increasing the meaningful participation of women at both officer and PBOR levels, beyond the medical and nursing corps. Women's inclusion not only enriches understanding of risk and vulnerability but also enhances community engagement and decision-making. To align with global frameworks like the Sendai Gender Action Plan,^[42] India must view women not just as vulnerable populations but as active stakeholders and participants in designing and delivering effective disaster response.



*Indian Army undertaking flood rescue efforts in Devipura, Champawat, Kumaon Region in Sept 2025.
(Source: X - @UBArea_IA)*



*A victim of the earthquake in Turkey, thanking an Indian Army Medical Corps Officer during Op Dost in Feb 2023.
(Source: X-@ZahackTanvir)*



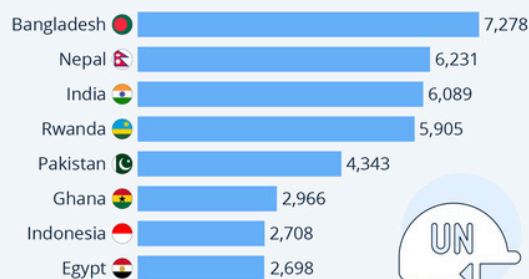
*An Indian Army Medical Corps officer checks on an earthquake victim in Myanmar during Op Brahma in Apr 2025.
(Source: X- @adgpi)*

India's Contribution to Multilateralism and Indian Soft Power

India has historically been one of the leading troop-contributing countries (TPCCs) to UN peace operations. Its efforts have been widely acknowledged by the UN,^[43] especially the ability of Indian forces to work with local communities in post-conflict peacebuilding efforts. Gender parity amongst peacekeeping forces is vital to the success of UN missions, and to ensure this, the UN has set gender parity targets for TPCCs. While India has consistently met the gender target for uniformed female officers (25% by 2028), its negligent recruitment of women as PBORs has meant that it falls significantly behind the gender target for female troops (15% by 2028). Much of India's female troops' contributions come from the CRPF and the Assam Rifles. This gap draws a critical gaze to India's otherwise significant peacekeeping contribution. The recruitment of women in other ranks as part of the Agnipath scheme needs an urgent increase, along with an expansion in the deployment of uniformed women PBORs to corps beyond the military police, to bridge this gap.

The Biggest Contributors to UN Peacekeeping Operations

Main contributors of uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping operations as of May 31, 2023*



* Uniformed personnel constitute mission experts, police units, staff officers and troops
Source: UN Peacekeeping



statista



A contingent of Indian women peacekeepers, the country's largest single unit of female troops in a U.N. mission since 2007, arrives in Abyei to begin its deployment with the United Nations Interim Security Force. File (Source: ANI)

This section has highlighted some important operational benefits of increasing women's meaningful participation. But what does a process of gender-responsive organizational transformation look like? More importantly, what would it look like for the Indian Army? Over the next two sections, we answer these questions and articulate the building blocks of potential gender reforms for the Indian Army as well as reform options available to it.

Making Women's Meaningful Participation a Reality: Building Blocks of Gender Reforms

Increasing women's meaningful participation in the armed forces is a complex and challenging process. The experiences of national armies that have attempted similar organizational transformation show that it demands the sustained commitment of and partnership between multiple stakeholders, each bringing their expertise with the shared intention of fostering an inclusive environment for increasing uniformed women's participation in a meaningful and not just symbolic manner.

Political Will and Parliamentary Oversight

Recent changes related to women's participation have been implemented largely in response to Supreme Court directives. While these dismantle crucial barriers, they are not a replacement for systematic gender-responsive organizational transformation. Follow-up issues being brought by women officers to the Supreme Court show that in undertaking these piecemeal changes, the Army has missed the forest for the trees; these siloed policy changes are now creating a ripple of related gender discrimination issues. In the absence of a planned approach to women's integration, this is unsurprising. The question now is: who can initiate a planned organizational change? With whom does the responsibility lie?

The Indian Army is under civilian control through the Executive, the Ministry of Defense, and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defense.^[44] A planned approach to increasing women's meaningful participation will need to be initiated and overseen by these institutions. Political will and parliamentary oversight are needed for developing appropriate policy frameworks and implementation plans. Beyond this planning, these institutions will hold authority for delegating responsibilities to various departments, creating new ones, setting gender targets and timelines, allocating appropriate gender budgets for the Army, and maintaining oversight of progress across these matters.

Budgeting for gender reforms plays a crucial role for civilian authorities. It is recommended that a specific percentage of the annual defense budget be made available to the Army for supporting gender integration initiatives, such as undertaking status reviews, developing strategic action plans, infrastructure development, conducting training and awareness programs to foster an inclusive military culture. In the absence of domestic funding, options like the Elsie Initiative Fund, a multi-partner trust fund, can be utilized. The Elsie Initiative Fund offers financial support and gender expertise for comprehensive gender assessments and the implementation of identified reforms. Armed forces and police institutions in many countries, like Bangladesh, Norway, Mexico, Kenya, Nepal, and Jordan,^[45] have used the Elsie Initiative Fund to undertake gender reforms.



Budgeting for gender reforms plays a crucial role for civilian authorities. It is recommended that a specific percentage of the annual defense budget be made available to the Army for supporting gender integration initiatives.

A final point of reflection on civilian control and oversight of the gender integration process: many of the civilian institutions involved in defense matters are themselves male-dominated. For instance, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defense for 2024-25 has only one female member and 30 male members.^[46] Within the Ministry of Defense, only two senior leadership posts are held by women out of more than 60 posts.^[47] This brings into question the quality of gender competence that will guide such a transition. It is recommended, therefore, that a) the Standing Committee on the Empowerment of Women should be involved in steering and overseeing this transition, and b) gender expertise be brought in through partnerships with civil society organizations. The second recommendation is addressed in greater detail below.

Civil-Military Collaboration

It is important to ensure gender reforms are planned based on gender expertise, which is currently lacking in Defense institutions. Here, civil-military collaboration between the Army and Indian civil society organizations with expertise in gender can play a pivotal role. Such a partnership will ensure reforms are both meaningfully gender responsive and sensitive to the Army's imperatives.

The integration of women into the armed forces should not be viewed as a task solely for the Army. It requires gender competence, which is not an area of expertise that any military institution holds. The absence of gender expertise within the armed forces and the MoD, while understandable, can be a significant hurdle in undertaking effective reforms on gender equality. This situation, therefore, calls for collaboration between civil society and the Army. A pool of experts and partner organizations that have expertise in gender-sensitive security sector reforms could be brought together to guide the Indian Army's gender integration efforts.

Internationally, many examples of civil-military collaborations on gender reforms exist. For instance, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance has supported the Malian Police Force and Georgian Armed Forces in their gender mainstreaming efforts; RESDAL has worked with Armed Forces and Police of Uruguay and Mexico and was supported by EIF in these efforts; African Civil Security Network has worked with the African Union on Security Sector Reforms and Governance, as well as with the national armies of multiple African countries.

Australia deserves a special mention with respect to civil-military collaboration on gender equality and integration. The Australian Defense Forces (ADF) have worked with the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) on various aspects of gender equality for over a decade. Since 2014, the AHRC has developed over 40 reports on gender equality for the ADF.^[48] In 2016, for instance, the AHRC submitted a report on the "Fast Jet Pilot Project," which looked at



Australia deserves a special mention with respect to civil-military collaboration on gender equality and integration. The Australian Defense Forces (ADF) have worked with the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) on various aspects of gender equality for over a decade. Since 2014, the AHRC has developed over 40 reports on gender equality for the ADF.

why there were no women fast jet pilots in the Australian Air Force. Of the 65 recommendations given by the AHRC, 63 were implemented immediately, and the remaining two were implemented on a more long-term basis. The Australian Air Force was able to select women fast jet pilots for training in the following year and increased their numbers significantly over a 5-year period. The ADF has kept the gender integration process fairly transparent by opening itself to external evaluations by the AHRC on an annual basis, which, according to it, is done “to understand the impact/effect of our policies and our culture, with the aim to increase the participation and advancement of women.” The results are published annually in the ‘Women in the ADF Report’. Each year, ADF works with the AHRC on further interventions that are recommended according to the findings in the Women in ADF report.^[49]

These international examples underscore the value of sustained, transparent partnerships between militaries and gender-competent civil society actors, and are rich with transferable practices. For the Indian Army, collaboration with Indian gender experts and civil society organizations that work on gender and security holds a strong promise.

Assessment on the Status of Women in the Indian Army

The foundation of any effective policy change lies in a thorough understanding of the current situation. Therefore, a first crucial step must be to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the status of women in the Indian Army. This evaluation will provide invaluable insights into the present status of women, identifying gaps in various aspects such as recruitment, retention, advancement criteria and procedures, posting and relocation policies, training needs at multiple levels, gender-sensitive infrastructure requirements, etc.

According to public records, the last holistic assessment of the status of women in the Indian Armed Forces was commissioned by the 15th Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Empowerment of Women and was conducted in 2011.^[50] In light of recent changes, an updated evaluation is not only beneficial but absolutely necessary and long overdue. It is, in fact, concerning that such an assessment has not been called for in recent years, and multiple changes with regard to the participation of women have been implemented without being grounded in evidence resulting from such an assessment.

In the absence of a comprehensive status report, policy changes related to women in the Indian Army tend to occur in isolation, lacking both systemic coherence and the cultural transformation necessary for meaningful impact. While the Government has cited the Army’s “current requirements”^[51] to justify policies like capping women’s NDA admissions at 19 seats, the basis for this figure remains unclear - how it was determined, what specific needs it addresses, and what evidence supports it. Without such clarity, it is impossible to assess whether these measures dismantle structural barriers or entrench the status quo, and whether they reflect constructive, gender-sensitive policymaking or further diversify forms of discrimination against women in the Army.

Today, gender-responsive organizational transformation is a professional field of expertise that needs to be utilized for the benefit of the Army as an institution and uniformed women to ensure they experience a full and satisfying career in the Indian Army, similar to their male counterparts.

A Strategic and Implementation Plan for Gender Equality

The Indian Army needs a well-crafted strategy and action plan for increasing meaningful participation of women. Best commissioned by the Executive through the MoD, such a plan should involve the Adjutant General Branch, the Military Secretary's Branch, along with trusted civil society. The latter should have expertise in gender to offer relevant information and expertise for its development.

So far, the Indian Army's ongoing efforts toward integrating women in its ranks have been marked by incremental changes rather than a comprehensive and coherent strategy. A Gender Integration Strategic and Implementation Plan is therefore essential. Without it, policy decisions risk being reactive, fragmented, and driven by external pressures rather than guided by institutional assessment, long-term planning, and accountability. Examples of similar policy frameworks of other Armies, such as the UK's Diversity and Inclusion Strategy^[52] and Australia's Gender, Peace and Security Mandate,^[53] show that a well-structured plan would allow the Indian Army to move from ad hoc inclusion to systemic transformation.

A strategic implementation plan would establish a shared vision, set measurable goals, map responsibilities across leadership and departments, and ensure that efforts are harmonized toward gender-inclusive outcomes. Such a strategic plan will focus on several lines of action: recruitment of women (both officer and PBOR ranks), training, career advancement, deployment, posting and relocation policies; sexual harassment prevention and gender sensitization training aligned with global best practices; codes of conduct; representation of women in leadership positions and justice mechanisms; and establishing a gender equality and empowerment division. The scope of this strategy should extend beyond numerical representation and a myopic focus on numbers.

This section outlined the foundational steps and strategic directions needed to enable gender integration in the Indian Army: from assessing the existing status of women in service to crafting a comprehensive implementation strategy. In the next section, we highlight some reform options for the Indian Army at the institutional and cultural levels, which can inform its gender integration efforts.



So far, the Indian Army's ongoing efforts toward integrating women in its ranks have been marked by incremental changes rather than a comprehensive and coherent strategy. A Gender Integration Strategic and Implementation Plan is therefore essential. Without it, policy decisions risk being reactive, fragmented, and driven by external pressures rather than guided by institutional assessment, long-term planning, and accountability.

Gender and the Indian Army's Reform Options

As has been detailed so far, a gender transition cannot be achieved by the Indian Army through isolated measures or ad hoc policy tweaks. Instead, the need of the hour is a comprehensive, gender-informed reform strategy that can confidently identify and address both structural and cultural issues preventing women's increased participation. As the Indian Army will be starting from scratch, the field is wide open when it comes to reform options, were it to undertake a gender-informed transition.

To bring some sense of focus, a preliminary menu of reform options has been outlined here and divided into institutional and cultural reforms. Institutional reforms involve recalibrating the Army's core systems - manpower planning, recruitment, HR policy, discipline, welfare, and postings - to make them gender-responsive. At the same time, cultural reforms are essential to dismantle deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, ways of thinking and being, to foster an environment where women can serve with dignity, safety, and purpose. The recommended reform options are not exhaustive but provide a much-needed look into what gender related organizational change could look like for the Indian Army. These are based on insights from the Indian experience and international best practices tailored to the Indian context.

Institutional Reforms

Institutional reforms will ensure that the Army's systems and procedures are gender-responsive i.e., they don't promote direct or indirect gender discrimination. These reforms will support the Indian Army in navigating a significant institutional change in a gender-informed and systematic manner, laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and future-ready force.

- **Manpower Planning:** For the Indian Army, like many other national armies that are undertaking the process of gender responsive organizational transformation, undertaking a Manpower planning review will be a crucial and primary area of review and reform. As part of such a review, current soldiering requirements would need to be assessed to ascertain which roles, ranks, and functions women can be integrated into currently, and over the medium and long term. For integration over medium and long terms, a review of manpower planning will reveal changes needed in policies, systems, recruitment, training, resources, etc.
- **Recruitment:** The Indian Army will need to undertake reforms that work to eliminate barriers to recruitment for women and open avenues for their increased recruitment in a more planned and meaningful manner than is presently the case. This will require it to set targets for a phased expansion and undertake reforms to realize those targets. It's important to note that currently, limitations on the recruitment of women exist across roles, ranks, and numbers. While more roles have been opened to women officers recently, it is unclear if this is accompanied by an increase in recruitment numbers that allow more women to occupy these roles and divisions. Further, recruitment of women in the Indian Army largely takes place at the officer ranks, with the recruitment of women PBORs being limited to a paltry number of 200 (compared to 1 lakh men) through the Agnipath scheme.^[54] Most of the women PBORs are deployed with the Military Police, facing a double bind of recruitment barriers. Even at the officer level, women are not given an equal opportunity to join the army as men. For instance, intake for women is limited to 19 out of 370 vacancies in the NDA. A recent petition was brought to the Supreme Court by a former NDA aspirant who claimed that she was denied admission despite performing better than men who had been selected.^[55]

These issues highlight that despite changes in recruitment policies, a lot more needs to be done first to understand how gender and recruitment intersect for the Indian Army and then take measures to undo identified barriers in a planned manner.

- **Discipline:** Justice and Accountability mechanisms will form an important pillar of support to enable the safe participation of women in the Indian Army. Currently, the Army follows the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act (2013) and has an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) mechanism established at the Command level. However, as the army is a traditionally male-dominated organization, a more proactive stance on justice and accountability matters, especially those related to gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and assault, needs to be taken. This can involve increasing the number of ICCs, ensuring participation of women in court-martial proceedings, and training officers to respond proactively with appropriate disciplinary actions in cases of gender hazing and harassment, among other issues. At present, no training on what sexual harassment is, and what available response mechanisms are, is provided to men. Some interviewees have reported that this training is offered to women officers only. Such a gender-blind approach to complaints, discipline, and justice mechanisms is unacceptable. More robust, victim-centric responses and procedures will ensure women who join the army can flourish in a safe environment, without the threat of gender-based discrimination and harassment from their peers and seniors.
- **Welfare:** As women carry disproportionate responsibilities with respect to family and caregiving in India, some welfare policies can be introduced to provide institutional support to address their caring responsibilities and enable their increased participation. This can include the provision of childcare facilities, improved coordination for spouse co-location, transferable childcare leave policies when both spouses are employed with the Army, and so on.
- **Postings:** The Indian Army can also undertake a thorough, gender-sensitive review of its various stations to ascertain the status of infrastructure, identify areas for upgrade, such as gender-specific toilets, safety, and the availability of connecting transportation to and from remote field areas, etc. Frequently, the lack of readiness of field stations is cited as a reason why the Army cannot recruit more women. A review will ensure these gaps are identified and appropriate changes undertaken.
- **Career Advancement:** On 23rd November 2021, the Indian Army adopted a “gender neutral” Career Progression Policy, following the grant of Permanent Commission to women.^[56] Yet, issues related to their career advancement persist and



A more proactive stance on justice and accountability matters, especially those related to gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and assault, needs to be taken. This can involve increasing the number of ICCs, ensuring participation of women in court-martial proceedings, and training officers to respond proactively with appropriate disciplinary actions in cases of gender hazing and harassment, among other issues.

have been brought to the attention of the Supreme Court by women officers. In 2023, promotions were denied to women officers who had been granted permanent commission, on the grounds that they lacked adequate training and command experience, which the Supreme Court termed as “arbitrary” reasons.^[57] Following these issues, in 2023, the Indian Army established a policy of “gender neutral” selection boards instead of separate ones for women. This, in effect, means men and women will be required to meet the same standards for promotions and has been touted as a progressive move.^[58] While positive on paper, it is unclear if this measure will take into account or overlook any gaps in the women officers’ experience that have arisen due to previous gender-discriminatory policies.

- **Department(s) for Gender Integration:** Examples of gender responsive organizational changes undertaken by other armies show that such a large organizational change is usually adopted across tri-services and coordinated by a single department, headed by a top senior officer. For instance, the UK's Diversity and Inclusion Programme is under the ultimate command of the Chief of Defense People (CDP) as the “Senior Responsible Owner”^[59] for all matters related to Defense personnel. For India, we suggest establishing a Directorate of Gender Integration (DGI) at the tri-service level, under the Headquarters Integrated Defense Staff (HQ IDS). This directorate would serve as the nerve center for all gender integration efforts, ensuring unified accountability while providing a customized, service-specific approach for all three services. It will monitor and evaluate implementation across the defense system, coordinate studies undertaken by each service to understand issues related to gender integration, advise leadership on risks and challenges, and ensure continuous alignment of policies and systems with evolving gender integration goals.

Beyond this, we recommend that each of the tri-services constitute a department expressly for the purpose of overseeing its implementation of gender integration plans, and report progress, challenges, and recommendations to the DGI. Such departments play a critical role in institutionalizing gender equality and integration by overseeing the day-to-day implementation of strategy, policies, and standards, and complaints. Fixing command and authority for gender inclusion within the army and also at the tri-services level is an imperative for the success of any gender integration plans and overall military effectiveness.

- **Military Gender Advisors:** National militaries are also increasingly staffing their departments for gender inclusion with Military Gender Advisors (MGAs) and Military Gender Focal Points (MFPs). These are officers with experience in operations, strategic planning, as well as requisite training on gender integration. They can support the integration of gender perspectives in military operations. They may also be supported by civilian gender advisors to bridge gender expertise gaps. Commanders can lean on MGAs to ensure policies are translated from paper to action, that necessary skills and attitudes are cultivated for gender integration to become a routine practice. Already, MGAs and MFPs are operational in international military operations and are being trained by the UN.^[60] India’s Major Radhika Sen received the Military Gender Advocate award from the UN Secretary General in 2024.^[61] This shows that skills and expertise necessary for performing these roles are already present with officers of the Indian Army and can be harnessed for enhancing women’s meaningful participation in the Indian Army.

Cultural Reforms

Military Culture, a product of the collection of norms, beliefs, prejudices, and perceptions that underpin unique behaviors demanded of military personnel, is an important factor influencing the treatment of women in the army.^[62] Armies are thriving grounds for developing very strong cultures as they enable strong unit cohesion, an important factor in military effectiveness.

A significant part of military culture is ideas, norms, and codes around masculinity, also called military masculinity. Military masculinity may promote and reinforce norms like “men and women are opposites”,^[63] to be an army man is to be anti-feminine;^[64] men are physically and mentally strong, women are physically weak and emotional; the army is not the right place for women because one needs to be mentally and physically tough. Such stereotypes and rigid beliefs make integration of women especially challenging in defense institutions. Therefore, promoting gender equality in the Indian Army will necessarily involve addressing such “dominant norms of masculinity” through cultural reforms.^[65] In fact, the most challenging aspect of a gender transformation lies in managing this cultural shift.

Worldwide, armed forces have launched cultural change programs to support their gender integration efforts. For instance, the Australian Defense Forces launched the “Pathway to Change” program in 2012 which is still ongoing. It’s aimed at undertaking key cultural reform priorities which promote gender inclusivity and racial diversity.^[66] The Australian Navy has launched “Next Generation Navy” which it describes as the Australian Navy’s “ongoing and enduring cultural transformation program”.^[67] The British Army’s strategy on gender integration- A Force for Inclusion (2018-2030) includes ‘mainstreaming Diversity and inclusion in Defense Culture and Behaviours’ as its second most important priority area of change and reform.

The US Air Force, as part of its cultural reform efforts, offers a course on ‘Men and Masculinity’^[68] to its cadets as a way to prevent sexual assault against uniformed women. The course “acknowledged the fact that men find it challenging to call out sexist and other forms of degrading behavior, such as hazing or bullying, not because they personally support it but because of the pressure to conform to the masculine codes that condone it”. It enables them to identify such pressure as stemming from harmful codes of masculinity. Such cultural efforts go a long way in cultivating healthier norms on masculinity, femininity, diversity, and inclusion.

By drawing on such international best practices, the Indian Army can benefit from cultural reforms when designed in collaboration with experts in gender equality and social inclusion. This approach will help address the ‘mindset’ question, prevent direct and indirect discrimination and violence against women, and create an enabling environment for women



Promoting gender equality in the Indian Army will necessarily involve addressing such “dominant norms of masculinity” through cultural reforms. In fact, the most challenging aspect of a gender transformation lies in managing this cultural shift.

personnel and officers. Cultural reforms can be accomplished through education, training, mentorship, etc. We explore these methods below:

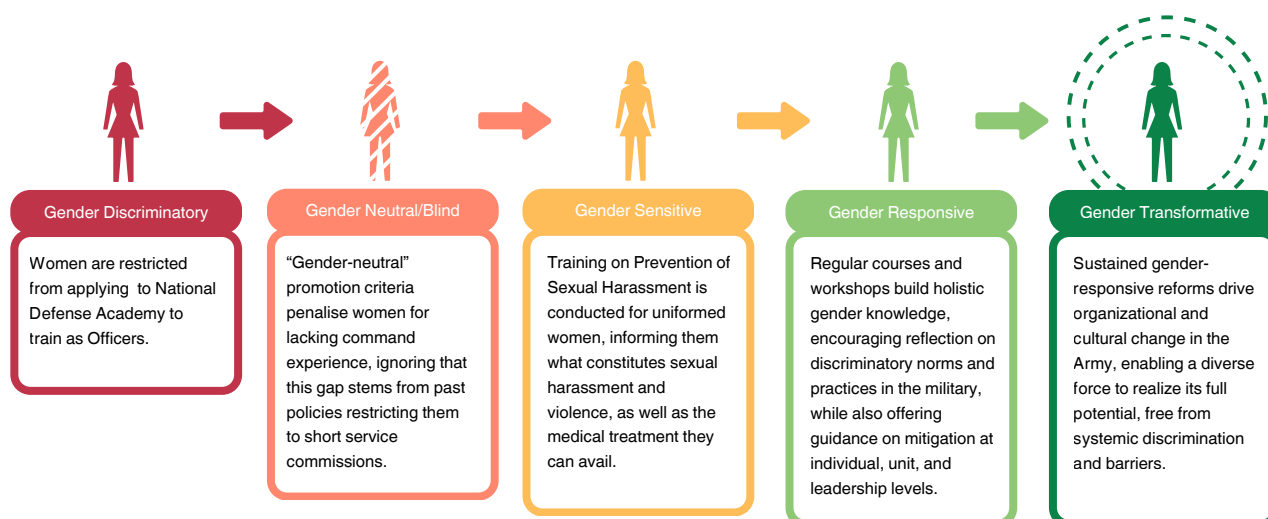
- **Education and Training:** Gender sensitivity training for all personnel, from recruits to senior officers, will become an important aspect of any gender reform. It is advised that this training should not be a one-time affair but a continuous process of education and awareness-building, forming an integral part of Professional Military Education (PME). Interviews with uniformed women in the Indian Army reveal that only trainings on the prevention of sexual harassment are provided, exclusively to uniformed women. These are also not conducted regularly despite being mandated by the POSH Act and by the Courts.^[69] Further, these trainings adopt a medical perspective instead of a sociological one. PME on gender issues is very extensive in scope, and the Indian Army has not even begun scratching the surface in this regard. In contrast, the Mexican Army undertakes numerous trainings, workshops, courses, conferences, etc. (upwards of 60) in collaboration with local civil society organizations and International NGOs like UN Women and ICRC. These are conducted on a wide range of gender focused issues, such as equity and gender violence, building equity between men and women of the Mexican armed forces, prevention of workplace sexual harassment, and prevention of gender inequity and discrimination.^[70]

In the absence of such training and education, male personnel and officers are likely to remain unaware of their own biases and unsupported in navigating behavioral changes towards their women colleagues. This not only damages interpersonal rapport but, at an institutional level, it drives such beliefs and biases underground, which later contribute to a culture of workplace discrimination towards women. Without being addressed in a healthy and systematic manner, such attitudes are likely to find shelter in discriminatory organizational policies, deflated unit cohesion, overcritical leadership, and peers who undermine women's work, gender-based bullying and discrimination, protracted legal battles, and personnel dissatisfaction across the board.

Further, increasing women's meaningful participation is often put off in India on the grounds that the personnel of the Indian Army are not "ready" to accept women as their peers. However, it is the task of relevant ministries, as well as the Army, to work with suitable civil society organizations to ensure that all service members are made ready for increased participation of women through PME.

- **Mentorship:** The experience of being a uniformed woman in a majority male institution like the Army is unique and very different from that of male servicemembers. Mentorship and peer-to-peer support are crucial in such circumstances. World over, militaries promote several mentorship and peer support programs either officially or in collaboration with civil society organizations. For instance, the Women in Defense Mentoring Programme of the UK Defense Forces pairs female mentees with more senior mentors (male or female) with the aim of supporting their career progression and promoting gender balance.^[71] The Army Servicewomen's Network is a professional network within the British Army that supports women of all ranks. It aims to help servicewomen reach their full potential by providing a platform for developing and expanding professional and personal interests.^[72] In India, similar mentorship programs could provide invaluable guidance and support, helping uniformed women navigate the unique challenges faced by women in the military.

Gender Scale Adapted to Military Examples*



* Adapted from UNFPA Technical Note on Gender Responsive and/or Transformative Approaches

Conclusion

As civilian and military leadership navigate the challenge of increasing women's participation in the Indian Army, this report aims to provide clarity amid the growing policy confusion surrounding women's participation. Through this report, we aim to present a look into holistic organizational transformation for increasing women's meaningful participation in the Indian Army.

We conclude this report with important caveats. First, while increasing women's participation can help fill many gaps and existing operational shortcomings, expectations must remain measured, not radical. Like their male counterparts, the performance of uniformed women is shaped by the systems and structures within which they are placed and the leadership they receive. Women's participation is one of the many factors influencing military effectiveness. It's important not to place all responsibility or blame for either revolutionary change or transition-related issues solely on women.

Second, civilian and military leadership are of utmost importance to the success of gender reforms. Leadership that has a positive mindset and recognizes the Army as a multifaceted institution, requiring diverse skills that can be better fulfilled by a diverse force, is crucial. Military leaders who value and possess the requisite human resource skills to manage the nuances of a mixed-gender unit are a far better predictor of women's impact than merely adding women and stirring them into male-dominated institutions, as is. Conversely, if women's participation is viewed as disruptive or of little value by leadership, then uniformed women, their perspectives, and contributions will remain undermined.

The conversation on women's meaningful participation in the Indian Army must move beyond binary gender comparisons. It should instead focus on reassessments of soldiering requirements, and institutional factors such as training, safe working conditions, leadership, and institutional culture preparedness.

Finally, as is apparent by now, achieving a gender-integrated army cannot be accomplished by a single actor alone. Working with allies, including gender experts outside the Army and men within the Army and in civilian institutions, speaks to Major Radhika Sen's advice on achieving gender equality: "Gender equality can be achieved when all of us work together".^[73]



The conversation on women's meaningful participation in the Indian Army must move beyond binary gender comparisons. It should instead focus on reassessments of soldiering requirements, and institutional factors such as training, safe working conditions, leadership, and institutional culture preparedness.

Endnotes

- [1] United Nations. "Indian Peacekeeper Wins 2023 Military Gender Advocate of Year Award." Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 28 May 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/pko825.doc.htm>
- [2] United Nations. "Indian Peacekeeper Is UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year." UN News, 28 May 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/05/1150326>
- [3] As per latest data posted by the Ministry of Defense in August 2023, See: Ministry of Defence. "Women in Defence Forces." Press Information Bureau, 4 Aug. 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1945707>
- [4] Sharma, Shivani. "Army Facing Shortage of Over 1 Lakh Personnel amid Border Tensions, Says Defence Ministry." India Today, 14 Apr. 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/indian-army-soldiers-shortage-border-tension-defense-ministry-2709056-2025-04-14>
- [5] Women can join the Indian army in PBOR ranks through Agnipath scheme. However, they are integrated only in the Military police and in very few numbers.
- [6] These figures are from 2019, which is the last publicly available record on the percentage of women in the tri services, made available by the Ministry of Defense. Accessible: Ministry of Defence. "Status of Women in Armed Forces." Press Information Bureau, 7 Jan. 2019, <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1558892>
- [7] https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive/ArchiveSecondPhase/DEFENSE/1958-JULY-DEC-MIN-OF-DEFENSE/PDF/DEF-1958-10-29_165.pdf
- [8] Short service commission offered an initial contractual service period with the Indian Army, which could be extended up to 10 to 14 years
- [9] The only exceptions are the army's legal and education wings, where women officers have been eligible for permanent commissions since 2008.
- [10] The National Defense Academy (NDA), located in Khadakwasla, Pune, is India's premier tri-service training institution where cadets of the Army, Navy, and Air Force train together before proceeding to their respective service academies for pre-commissioning training.
- [11] Sharma, Vasudha. "Supreme Court Allows Women Officers to Challenge Army's Promotion Policy." Business Standard, 16 Apr. 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/supreme-court-allows-women-officers-to-challenge-army-s-promotion-policy-124041600650_1.html
- [12] The Wire. "Supreme Court Gives Army Four Months to Fix Policy on Promotion of Women Officers." The Wire, 5 Dec. 2023, <https://thewire.in/law/supreme-court-gives-army-four-months-to-fix-policy-on-promotion-of-women-officers>
- [13] The Wire. "Supreme Court Gives Army Four Months to Fix Policy on Promotion of Women Officers." The Wire, 5 Dec. 2023, <https://thewire.in/law/supreme-court-gives-army-four-months-to-fix-policy-on-promotion-of-women-officers>
- [14] Choudhary, Amit Anand. "Why Only 19? SC Asks Govt to Explain Cap on Women in NDA." The Times of India, 19 Jan. 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/why-only-19-sc-asks-govt-to-explain-cap-on-women-in-nda/articleshow/88983242.cms#:~:text=A%20bench%20of%20Justices%20Sanjay,women%20will%20be%20given%20admission.>
- [15] Anand, Utkarsh. "In Supreme Court, Centre Justifies the Limit on Women Candidates in NDA." Hindustan Times, 8 Mar. 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-supreme-court-centre-justifies-the-limit-on-women-candidates-in-nda-101646679002057.html>
- [16] Hindustan Times. "Around One Lakh Agniveers Enrolled by Army till Now, Says Top Officer." Hindustan Times, 21 July 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/around-one-lakh-agniveers-enrolled-by-army-till-now-says-top-officer-101721577642853.html>
- [17] ET Now. "Indian Army Recruitment 2025: Agniveers Hiring Alert – Apply Now at joinindianarmy.nic.in." ET Now Digital, 14 July 2025, <https://www.etnownews.com/jobs/indian-army-recruitment-2025-agniveers-hiring-alert-apply-now-at-joinindianarmy-nic-in-article-151308745>
- [18] There is no one fixed definition of meaningful participation of women. The description outlined in this report builds on findings from desk research and Key Informant Interviews conducted to understand challenges preventing full participation of women in the Indian Army, as well as from the definition laid out by the Elsie Initiative Fund which works to promote meaningful participation of uniformed women in UN Peacekeeping operations. To read further about the Elsie Initiative Fund and its definition of meaningful participation, go to: Global Affairs Canada. "Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations." Government of Canada, 9 July 2025, https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/gender_equality-egalite_des_genres/elsie_initiative-initiative_elsie.aspx?lang=eng

Endnotes

- [19] Gautreau, N.G. Social Policy and the Canadian Armed Forces: Gender Integration Analyzed. Canadian Forces College, JCSP 40 Exercise Solo Flight, 2014, <https://www.cfc.forces.gc.ca/259/290/301/305/gautreau.pdf>
- [20] Global Affairs Canada. "Gender, Peace and Security at Defence." Defence Activities – Programs and Initiatives, Australian Department of Defence, accessed 1 Sept. 2025, <https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/programs-initiatives/gender-peace-security-defence>
- [21] UK House of Commons Library. Women in the Armed Forces: Background Paper. Research Briefing, 12 July 2021, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7930/?_gl=1*15kjod3*_up*MQ.*_ga*NjQ3Nzk5OTg5LjE3MjU5NzQxMDc.*_ga_9684J19FT4*MTcyNTk3NDEwNy4xLjAuMTcyNTk3NDEwNy4wLjAuMA.*_ga_14RSNY7L8B*MTcyNTk3NDEwNy4xLjAuMTcyNTk3NDEwNy4wLjAuMA.
- [22] Biswas, Niloy Ranjan, et al. Results of the Measuring Opportunities for Women in Peace Operations (MOWIP) Assessment: Armed Forces of Bangladesh MOWIP Report 2022. Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), June 2023, https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/Bangladesh_ArmedForcesMOWIP_EN-June2023.pdf
- [23] SecurityWomen. "Brazil Allows Women to Enlist in the Military." SecurityWomen, 3 Sept. 2024, <https://www.securitywomen.org/post/brazil-allows-women-to-enlist-in-the-military>
- [24] Treadwell, Teresa A. The Effects of Sustained Operations on Female Soldiers' Performance. ARL Tech. Rep., Army Research Laboratory, 1997, ADA332956, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA332956.pdf>
- [25] Egnell, Robert. "Gender Perspectives and Military Effectiveness: Implementing UNSCR 1325 and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security." PRISM, vol. 6, no. 1, Mar. 2016, pages 72–89, <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Gender-Perspectives-and-Military-Effectiveness.pdf>
- [26] Sharma, Shivani. "Army Facing Shortage of Over 1 Lakh Personnel amid Border Tensions, Says Defence Ministry." India Today, 14 Apr. 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/indian-army-soldiers-shortage-border-tension-defense-ministry-2709056-2025-04-14>
- [27] King, Anthony. "Women in Combat." The RUSI Journal, vol. 158, no. 1, Feb. 2013, pp. 4–11, doi:10.1080/03071847.2013.774634 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2013.774634#d1e133>
- [28] AFSPA- Armed Forces Special Powers Act grants special powers to the Armed Forces including, use of lethal force without authorization, search and arrest without warrant and de-facto immunity from prosecution unless sanctioned by the Central Government.
- [29] United Nations. "Women in Peacekeeping." United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed 2 Sept. 2025, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/women-peacekeeping#:~:text=Better%20access:%20Gender%20integrated%20teams,of%20the%20United%20Nations%20Charter>.
- [30] Boudre, Sophie, and Lesley Myers. "Meaningful Inclusion of Women Is Not Optional, It Is Essential": Member States Reinforce Support for Women in Peacekeeping at Ministerial." United Nations Peacekeeping, 20 May 2025, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/meaningful-inclusion-of-women-is-not-optional-it-is-essential-member-states-reinforce-support-women#:~:text=Inclusive%20teams%20make%20peacekeeping%20more,and%20active%20at%20every%20level>.
- [31] Boudre, Sophie, and Lesley Myers. "Meaningful Inclusion of Women Is Not Optional, It Is Essential": Member States Reinforce Support for Women in Peacekeeping at Ministerial." United Nations Peacekeeping, 20 May 2025, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/meaningful-inclusion-of-women-is-not-optional-it-is-essential-member-states-reinforce-support-women#:~:text=Inclusive%20teams%20make%20peacekeeping%20more,and%20active%20at%20every%20level>.
- [32] BBC. "Counting the Dead in Manipur's Shoot-to-Kill War." BBC News, 3 July 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-40271353>
- [33] Biswas, Soutik. "Manipur: The Daring Women Standing Up to Troops in Indian State." BBC News, 30 June 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66039119>
- [34] Ministry of Defence. "Army Releases Book on Rashtriya Rifles." Press Information Bureau, 28 Mar. 2017, www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1485780.
- [35] Assam Rifles. Civic Action Programme, Assam Rifles: January 2015. Assam Rifles, Jan. 2015, <https://www.assamrifles.gov.in/DOCS/CAP/JAN15.pdf>

Endnotes

- [36] Indian Army. Updated Leave Rules, Fourth Edition. Indian Army, [n.d.], <https://www.indianarmy.nic.in/writereaddata/documents/Updated%20Leave%20Rules%20Fourth%20Edition.pdf>
- [37] Army Welfare Education Society. Colleges Under AWES. Army Welfare Education Society, accessed 2 Sept. 2025, <https://www.awesindia.com/college.aspx>
- [38] Press Trust of India. "Indian Women Peacekeepers Inspire Liberian Girls." NDTV, 13 Jan. 2016, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/indian-women-peacekeepers-inspire-liberian-girls-1265343>
- [39] Sharma, Suparna. "Gender Bias in the Army: 'Pretty Commanders' and a Mindset of 'Just Soldiers.'" Deccan Chronicle, 24 Feb. 2020, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/240220/gender-bias-in-the-army-pretty-commanders-and-a-mindset-of-just.html>
- [40] United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. Disaster and Gender Statistics. UNISDR, 2009, https://www.unisdr.org/files/48152_disasterandgenderstatistics.pdf
- [41] National Disaster Management Authority (India). National Disaster Management Policy, 2009. Government of India, 2009, https://nidm.gov.in/PDF/policies/ndm_policy2009.pdf
- [42] a global initiative designed to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment into disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts. For more see: United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. "What Is the Sendai Gender Action Plan?" UNDRR, 18 Mar. 2024, <https://www.undrr.org/news/what-sendai-gender-action-plan>
- [43] Press Trust of India. "India Important Supporter of Peacekeeping: UN Peacekeeping Chief Lacroix." The Hindu, 30 May 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/india-important-supporter-of-peacekeeping-un-peacekeeping-chief-lacroix/article69636578.ece>
- [44] Mukherjee, Anit. "Towards Control and Effectiveness: The Ministry of Defence and Civil-Military Relations in India." The Journal of Strategic Studies, vol. 45, no. 6–7, Sept. 2022, pp. 820–842, doi:10.1080/01402390.2022.2118115 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2022.2118115#abstract>
- [45] "Elsie Initiative Fund." Elsie Initiative Fund, <https://elsiefund.org/>
- [46] "Standing Committee on Defence." Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2024, https://sansad.in/getFile/lsscommittee/Defense/18_Defense_2.pdf?source=loksabhadocs
- [47] "Who's Who." Ministry of Defence, Government of India, <https://mod.gov.in/dod/en/whos-who>
- [48] "United Nations Commission on the Status of Women Address." Australian Army, 10 Mar. 2023, <https://www.army.gov.au/news-and-events/speeches-and-transcripts/2023-03-10/united-nations-commission-status-women-address>
- [49] "United Nations Commission on the Status of Women Address." Australian Army, 10 Mar. 2023, <https://www.army.gov.au/news-and-events/speeches-and-transcripts/2023-03-10/united-nations-commission-status-women-address>
- [50] "Empowerment of Women Committee Report." Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2013, eparlib.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/63958/1/15_Empowerment_of_Women_10.pdf.
- [51] "Supreme Court Cannot Order 50% Quota for Women in NDA." IMR Media, 27 Apr. 2025, <https://imrmedia.in/supreme-court-cannot-order-50pc-quota-for-women-in-nda/>
- [52] "Defence Innovation External Engagement Strategy." UK Ministry of Defence, 6 Aug. 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f2d68ee8fa8f57ad042910f/20180806-MOD_DI_Plan_A4_v14_Final-U.pdf
- [53] "Gender, Peace and Security at Defence." Australian Department of Defence, <https://www.defence.gov.au/defense-activities/programs-initiatives/gender-peace-security-defense>
- [54] HT. "Around one lakh Agniveers enrolled by army till now, says top officer." Hindustan Times, 21 July 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/around-one-lakh-agniveers-enrolled-by-army-till-now-says-top-officer-101721577642853.html>
- [55] "Supreme Court Cannot Order 50% Quota for Women in NDA." IMR Media, 27 Apr. 2025, <https://imrmedia.in/supreme-court-cannot-order-50pc-quota-for-women-in-nda/>
- [56] Ministry of Defence. "Women in Defence Services." Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 17 Mar. 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1908062#:~:text=Indian%20Army:%20Consequent%20to%20grant,Services%20where%20they%20are%20com> missioned.

Endnotes

- [57] IANS. "Arbitrary": SC on denial of promotion to women armed forces officers." ETLegalWorld, 3 Nov. 2023, <https://legal.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/litigation/arbitrary-sc-on-denial-of-promotion-to-women-armed-forces-officers/104951068>
- [58] IANS. "Arbitrary": SC on denial of promotion to women armed forces officers." ETLegalWorld, 3 Nov. 2023, <https://legal.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/litigation/arbitrary-sc-on-denial-of-promotion-to-women-armed-forces-officers/104951068>
- [59] Defence Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2018 – 2030 (A Force for Inclusion). Royal Air Force Recruitment, 3 July 2020, https://recruitment.raf.mod.uk/recruitment/media/3900/20200703-mod_di-plan_a4_v14_final-u.pdf
- [60] UNITAR. Military Gender Adviser Online Training. United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), <https://unitar.org/sustainable-development-goals/peace/our-portfolio/pre-deployment-support-military-police-corrections-and-civilians/military-gender-advisor-online-training#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20Military%20Gender,of%20UN%20peace%20operations%20mandates>.
- [61] United Nations. "Indian Peacekeeper Wins 2023 Military Gender Advocate of Year Award." Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 28 May 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/pko825.doc.htm>
- [62] Australian Human Rights Commission. "ADFA: Description of Current Culture." Australian Human Rights Commission, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/projects/1-adfa-description-current-culture>
- [63] Watson, Callum. "Defence and Gender." Gender and Security Toolkit: Tool 3, edited by Megan Bastick, DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, and UN Women, 2019, https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/GSToolkit_Tool-3%20EN%20FINAL_0.pdf
- [64] Watson, Callum. "Defence and Gender." Gender and Security Toolkit: Tool 3, edited by Megan Bastick, DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, and UN Women, 2019, https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/GSToolkit_Tool-3%20EN%20FINAL_0.pdf
- [65] Watson, Callum. "Defence and Gender." Gender and Security Toolkit: Tool 3, edited by Megan Bastick, DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, and UN Women, 2019, https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/GSToolkit_Tool-3%20EN%20FINAL_0.pdf
- [66] Ministry of Defence. Pathway to Change: Evolving Defence Culture. Department of Defence (Australia), launched 7 Mar. 2012, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/pathway-change-evolving-defence-culture>
- [67] "Next Generation Navy." Royal Australian Navy, Australia, <https://www.navy.gov.au/about-navy/strategic-planning/next-generation-navy>
- [68] Watson, Callum. "Defence and Gender." Gender and Security Toolkit: Tool 3, edited by Megan Bastick, DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, and UN Women, 2019, https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/GSToolkit_Tool-3%20EN%20FINAL_0.pdf
- [69] Sajeev, Upasana. "Prima Facie Derogatory: Madras High Court Restrains Savukku Shankar From Making Allegations Linking IPS Officer To Sivaganga Custodial Death." LiveLaw, 4 Aug. 2025, <https://www.livelaw.in/high-court/madras-high-court/madras-high-court-savukku-shankar-temporarily-restrained-allegation-against-ips-officer-299849>
- [70] A list of educational initiatives and trainings conducted on gender in 2021 by Mexican Army can be found here: First Report on the Implementation of the National Action Plan of Mexico for the Follow-Up of UNSC Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security. WPS Focal Points Network, 2022, <https://wpsfocalpointsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Report-PNA-1325-Mexico1.pdf>
- [71] Women in Defence UK Infopack 2024. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/612ec6ef753a9064ab075c45/t/66964a0df726cd1f3a04961e/1721125396858/1425+WiD+infopack+2024%284%29.pdf>
- [72] The Army Servicewomen's Network Is Ten Years Old. Soldier (Royal Army magazine), July 2025, <https://soldier.army.mod.uk/issues/july-2025/views/army-servicewomen-s-network>
- [73] "Army Servicewomen's Network — The Army Servicewomen's Network Is Ten Years Old." YouTube, uploaded by Soldier Magazine (Royal Army magazine), 1 July 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8-e3unlxVo>



*Major Radhika Sen, an Indian peacekeeper who served with the UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), receiving the '2023 United Nations Military Gender Advocate of the Year' Award from UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres.
(Photo/X/@adgpi)*

Cover Image: Captain Tania Shergill, an officer with the Indian Army's Corps of Signals, became India's first woman Parade Adjutant to lead an all-male contingent at the Republic Day Parade in 2020. (Image source: Times Now)

