

A Study of Social and Cultural Factors Influencing the Induction of Women in Combat Roles in the Indian Armed Forces

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Abstract—There are many social and cultural factors that affect the induction of women in combat roles in the Indian Armed Forces. Conventional beliefs that associate combat roles with masculinity create challenges for the integration of women into the Armed Forces, especially when women have to balance their military duties with family responsibilities. India's patriarchal system challenges women's equality in the military, wherein sometimes their authority and leadership skills may also be questioned. Many soldiers hailing from rural areas and having conservative gender views may find it difficult to accept women in leadership roles. Concerns have also been raised about unit cohesion potentially being affected by social dynamics and traditional gender roles. The expectation from women to prioritize family responsibilities, combined with the difficulties of balancing military and family duties, often discourages them from pursuing combat roles. Media depictions also perpetuate stereotypes and influence public perception and acceptance of women in combat roles. Although attitudes are slowly changing, significant barriers still hinder the participation of women in combat roles in the Indian Armed Forces. This study analyzes the social and cultural factors that influence the induction of women in combat roles within the Indian Armed Forces.

Index Terms—gender biases, patriarchal, physiological, stereotyped, unit cohesion.

I. INTRODUCTION

The United States Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, has brought attention to the role of women in the U.S. military by expressing doubts about the effectiveness of female soldiers in combat on a podcast, in which he openly said that women should not be permitted to

serve in combat roles. Subsequently, during his Senate confirmation, he faced a barrage of questions regarding his stance on women serving in the military and was criticized for disparaging female service members. He stated to the Senate that his proposed elimination of 'woke' policies, including diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, would be welcomed by the U.S. military personnel. Although he affirmed that women would still be eligible for combat roles, he added that they would have to meet the laid down high standards.

The discussion about women's roles in the military extends beyond the United States. In India, a similar debate over women holding command positions has emerged. A leaked letter from a senior Indian general in late 2024 claimed that management problems existed in army units commanded by women. This internal review of eight female commanding officers, after being published in the Indian media, ignited a national debate. The general's letter accused these women officers of trivial ego issues and a lack of empathy towards their troops, suggesting that this lack of empathy might stem from 'a tendency to overcompensate'.

In India, women are still restricted from serving in certain core combat roles within the army, such as infantry, armoured, and mechanized units. Nevertheless, in a notable development, a group of women officers is now serving in the army's artillery regiment. Cautious but deliberate steps are being taken by the Armed Forces towards the induction of women into combat roles. However, in the midst of the debate over the expanding role of women in the military, it is

crucial to distinguish between placing women in combat positions for symbolic reasons and addressing an actual operational requirement.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Munshi (2018), a gender-inclusive workforce enhances organizational performance. The study recommends undertaking a comprehensive review of human resource policies in the Indian Armed Forces to facilitate the integration of gender diversity. Bansal (2024) examines the important roles that women have played as part of United Nations peacekeeping and peacebuilding forces. The author discusses the historical under-representation of women in Armed Forces due to economic, social, and political reasons.

Robinson and O'Hanlon (2020) examine the evolving role of women in the U.S. Armed Forces. The study highlights the important milestones in gender integration, such as the 1948 legislation allowing women's entry, the 1970's admission to military academies, and the decision to grant them combat positions taken during President Obama's era. Ahlback et al. (2022) study the political process of integrating women into military roles in Scandinavia and Finland. The study highlights the historical continuity of women's participation in the Scandinavian military amidst the dual crises of military labour needs and gender equality politics in the 1970s. In contrast Finland delayed integrating women in its military due to sufficient male personnel. Bakshi D. (2003) highlights that many nations, including India, have excluded women from direct combat roles due to sociological and psychological reasons. The author emphasizes that combat roles should be based on actual capabilities rather than gender biases. According to Lama and Paul (2021), empowering women is crucial for national progress, and India's efforts to admit girls into traditionally male military institutions like Sainik Schools demonstrate the government's commitment to gender equality. Parmar (2023) highlights the increasing participation of women in the Indian Armed Forces and stresses the need for further policy measures to achieve full gender parity and facilitate the induction of women into combat roles.

Sonawane and Rampure (2024) examine how the role of women in military operations has evolved over

time, from their significant contribution in various support roles during the World Wars to serving in combat roles today. Sharma and Gupta (2021) emphasize that although India has made significant strides in reducing gender barriers in various sectors including the military, true success lies in providing an opportunity to women to participate in combat roles. Suman (2010) is of the opinion that the debate on women's roles in the Armed Forces overlooks its impact on military effectiveness. The study recommends that the Armed Forces should adopt a gradual approach and continue to employ women in non-combat roles, while retaining the existing policy against their induction in combat arms. Singh J.P. (2021) emphasizes that numerous countries, including the U.S., have integrated women into combat roles. He argues that if the induction of women in combat positions enhances the operational efficiency without compromising combat readiness, India should also take immediate steps for gender integration in its military. Deb (2024) examines the need for gender sensitization among military leaders, highlighting the Karnataka High Court's decision to strike down gender-exclusive provisions. The study stresses the importance of developing an Indian model for integrating women into the Armed Forces.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A. Evolving Role of Women in the Armed Forces

The role of women in the country's Armed Forces has significantly evolved over the years. During World War I, women were inducted as nurses in army hospitals due to a shortage of male personnel. In 1942, under the British colonial rule, a Women's Auxiliary Corps was established in which women could serve in non-combatant clerical roles.

After India gained independence, it took a long time for women to gain admission into the Armed Forces. Under the Army Act of 1950, women were ineligible for regular commissions except in specified corps, departments, or branches as determined by notifications from the central government. On 1 November 1958, the Army Medical Corps became the first branch of the Indian Army to grant regular commissions to women.

Since 1992, women have been permitted to serve in India's Armed Forces under short service commissions, which confer officer ranks for a limited

duration. However, legal restrictions impeded the advancement of their careers. In 2008, women were first inducted as permanent commissioned officers in the Legal and Education corps.

A landmark Supreme Court ruling in 2020 granted women the right to permanent commissions, allowing them to access the same opportunities as their male counterparts, including holding command posts. In 2020, women were first inducted into eight additional branches in the army as permanent commissioned officers.

In 2021, 83 women were inducted as sepoy for the first time in the Indian Army's Corps of Military Police. Subsequently, in 2023, women were inducted into the Indian Navy as sailors after successfully completing training from INS Chilka, and into the Indian Air Force as airwomen after passing out from the Airmen Training School, Belagavi.

According to the latest government data released in 2023, there are 4,958 women personnel employed across the three Armed Forces, excluding those in medical, dental, and nursing roles. Presently, the Indian Army employs 1,733 female officers and 100 women personnel of other ranks. The Indian Air Force has 1,654 women officers and 155 airwomen (Agniveers). In the Navy, 580 women serve as officers while 726 are posted as sailors (Agniveers).

B. Women in Combat Roles

Debates on the inclusion of women in combat roles within the Indian Armed Forces have often brought out several concerns. Some arguments that are commonly put forth against women serving in combat roles in the Indian military include:

- (a) **Physical and Physiological Differences:** Inherent physical and physiological differences between men and women could pose challenges in combat roles. Men generally exhibit greater physical strength and endurance, which are considered essential for tough and challenging combat tasks. Additionally, factors such as menstruation and pregnancy are seen as potential obstacles, as they may affect a woman's readiness and ability to perform during high-stress combat situations.
- (b) **Social and Cultural Factors:** According to traditional gender roles and societal norms in India, women are viewed as caregivers rather than combatants. These deeply ingrained attitudes hinder the integration of women into combat

units. Moreover, there is unease amidst few retired and serving military personnel that the presence of women in combat units might disrupt unit cohesion, morale, and overall operational effectiveness.

- (c) **Logistical Challenges:** Integrating women into combat roles requires some logistical changes. This includes the provision of separate living facilities and carrying out modifications to the existing equipment and training programs to address physical differences. Additional resources and preparation would be needed to carry out such necessary adjustments.
- (d) **Psychological and Emotional Impact:** Combat exposure can have severe psychological effects on individuals, regardless of gender. However, there are specific worries about how women might cope with the emotional and psychological toll of combat, particularly in a culture where women are often shielded from violence.

It is important to note that these arguments are often debated, and there are also counterarguments in favor of women serving in combat roles. Research suggests that women are capable of performing a wide range of military duties, and many countries have successfully integrated women into their combat forces.

C. Social and Cultural Factors Affecting the Induction of Women in Combat Roles

Out of the above-mentioned arguments, social and cultural factors have the most significant influence on the participation of women in combat roles. The following are the five major social and cultural factors that influence the induction of women into combat positions in the Indian Armed Forces:

- (a) **India's Patriarchal Society:** Deep-rooted societal norms in our country associate combat roles with masculinity, and women are seen as caregivers and nurturers rather than fighters. This creates resistance to women in combat positions, both within the military and in the broader society. A significant portion of Indian soldiers come from rural backgrounds and have conservative views on gender roles. This can lead to difficulties in accepting women as equals, especially in leadership positions within combat units.
- (b) **Gender Biases Within the Military:** Because of the conventional gender roles accepted in the society, women find it challenging to be seen as

equals in traditionally male-dominated disciplines like the military. In a hierarchical military structure that has traditionally been male dominated, women's authority and ability to serve in combat situations is likely to be questioned.

- (c) **Balancing Military Duties and Family Responsibilities:** Women in India often face pressure to prioritize family and domestic responsibilities over careers. This discourages women from pursuing combat roles and restricts public support for the women who do venture to take up such a career. Moreover, women in combat roles may face unique challenges in balancing their military duties with family obligations, such as childcare and looking after parents. This conflict between their military career and family commitments may result in undesirable mental stress.
- (d) **Concerns About Unit Cohesion:** There are concerns that introducing women into combat units might negatively impact unit cohesion and morale. Some believe that mixed-gender units could face challenges due to social dynamics. For example, potential romantic relationships or sexual harassment within mixed-gender units could create tensions and disrupt unit cohesion. It is also felt that the presence of women in combat units might challenge traditional male bonding and camaraderie, which could have a negative effect on unit morale and esprit de corps.
- (e) **Stereotyped Media Portrayal:** How women are portrayed in the media can shape public perception. Emphasis on traditional gender roles or excessive focus on physical differences rather than capabilities reinforces stereotypes and hinders the acceptance of women in combat. Media portrayals can either reinforce positive stereotypes of women in the military, highlighting their capabilities and contributions, or perpetuate negative stereotypes, emphasizing their physical limitations or questioning their suitability for combat roles.

It is important to acknowledge that the above factors are evolving with time, and support for inducting women in combat roles within the Indian Armed Forces is increasing. However, overcoming these deeply ingrained social and cultural barriers remains a significant challenge.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Problem and Questions

The induction of women into combat roles in the Indian Armed Forces is influenced by various social and cultural factors. Traditional gender roles and societal norms often encourage a negative perception of women's capabilities, leading to opposition to their inclusion in combat positions. Cultural beliefs and stereotyped media portrayal further amplify these biases. It is important to examine the impact of these societal attitudes and cultural norms on the participation of women in combat roles in the Indian Armed Forces.

Research questions thus are:

- (a) What are the prevailing societal attitudes towards women in combat roles in the Indian Armed Forces?
- (b) What are the apparent barriers to the induction of women in combat roles?
- (c) What are the social and cultural factors that impact the acceptance of women in combat roles?
- (d) How can policies and practices be improved to facilitate the induction of women in combat roles?

B. Research Gaps

Review of literature has revealed that several studies have been undertaken on the subject of women serving in the military, including in combat roles. However, the existing research does not provide a comprehensive theoretical framework to understand the social and cultural factors that impact the induction of women in combat roles, specifically in the Indian Armed Forces.

It is also seen that there is a lack of empirical research on the subject. The existing studies do not provide sufficient data on the complex social and cultural aspects that affect the induction of women in combat roles. The existing research relies heavily on qualitative methods and the value of quantitative approach to understanding the subject has remained largely neglected.

Actionable policy recommendations for encouraging the induction of women in combat roles have also been found lacking in the existing studies.

C. Objectives of the Study

- (a) To identify the societal attitudes and cultural norms that influence the induction of women in combat roles.
- (b) To study the social and cultural factors that impact the induction of women in combat roles in the Indian Armed Forces.
- (c) To recommend policy and practical interventions to address the challenges that may be faced in inducting women in combat roles in the Indian Armed Forces.

D. Research Design

Exploratory and descriptive design of research was adopted in the study.

E. Sampling Design

In the present study, stratified random sampling was considered to ensure that the study produced reliable and valid results that could be generalized to the population of interest.

F. Data Collection

Primary data was collected by carrying out a survey. The researchers used concepts culled from the review of related literature as the basis while designing the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 20 close-ended questions and one open-ended question to elicit responses from the public. Respondents were requested to grade their responses on the 5-point Likert ordinal rating scale of 5-Strongly Agree, 4-Agree, 3-Neutral, 2-Disagree, 1-Strongly Disagree. The respondents included serving personnel from the Armed Forces, veterans and people from other walks of life. E-questionnaire was sent to the respondents, and 248 responses were received. The data collected through the e-questionnaire was tabulated and underwent a descriptive understanding. The secondary data was collected by reviewing research papers and articles on the subject, books, and research work already done in this domain.

V. ANALYSIS OF DATA AND FINDINGS

A. Demographic Data

The data was collected from respondents belonging to different age groups. Participants included respondents from the armed forces, veterans, and civilians. The demographic data revealed 75% male

and 25% female respondents, with the majority being serving armed forces personnel.

B. Attitudes Towards Women in General

Most respondents considered women as naturally better suited for nurturing roles than leadership roles (Figure 1). A significant proportion of responders had experience of interacting with women in leadership positions. A substantial majority believed that women were as capable as men in handling stressful situations (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: Women are better suited for nurturing roles than leadership roles?”

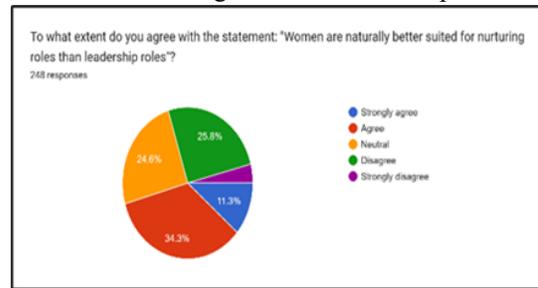
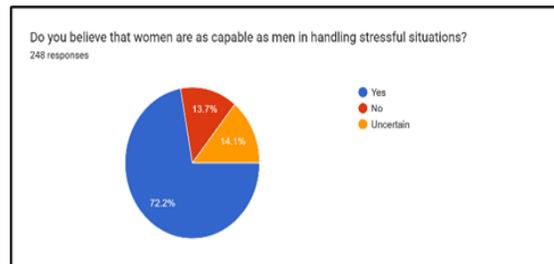


Figure 2: Response to the question “Do you believe that women are as capable as men in handling stressful situations?”



The attitudes towards women in general indicated a belief in their capabilities, though they were seen as naturally suited for nurturing roles rather than leadership positions.

C. Attitudes Towards Women in the Military

Response to the question “What is the biggest challenge you see for women serving in the Indian military?” indicated that social and cultural factors such as ‘balancing military duties and family responsibilities’ and ‘societal and cultural biases’ were considered as bigger challenges for women serving in the military as compared to aspects such

as physical strength, endurance, physiological issues and logistical challenges (Figure 3).

A significant majority of respondents believed that women should not be allowed to serve in combat roles in the Indian Armed Forces (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Response to the question “What is the biggest challenge you see for women serving in the Indian military?”

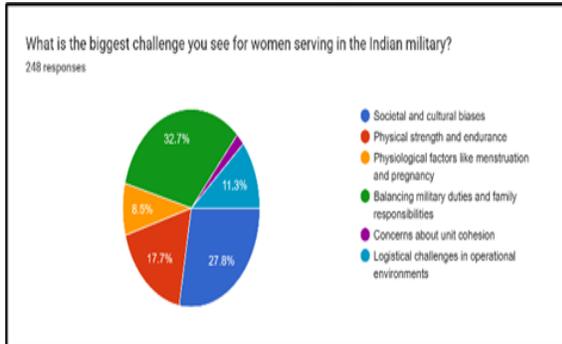
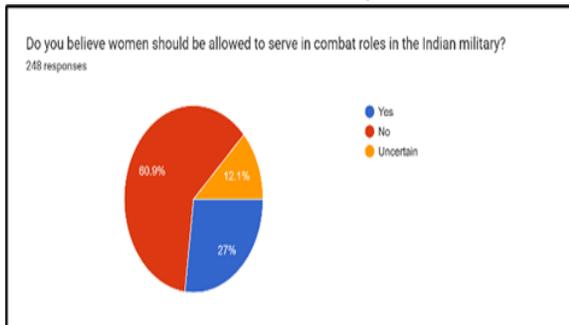


Figure 4: Response to the question “Do you believe women should be allowed to serve in combat roles in the Indian military?”



The survey revealed that social and cultural factors, such as balancing military duties with family responsibilities and societal biases, were seen as significant challenges for women in the Indian Armed Forces. The majority viewpoint was that women should not serve in combat roles.

D. India’s Patriarchal Society

A significant majority of respondents believed that the rural background of soldiers having conservative views on gender roles could lead to difficulties in accepting women as equals, especially in leadership positions within combat units (Figure 5). A substantial proportion of respondents also expressed agreement with the notion that women were

emotionally less suited for the stress of combat than men (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: Rural background of soldiers having conservative views on gender roles can lead to difficulties in accepting women as equals, especially in leadership positions within combat units?”

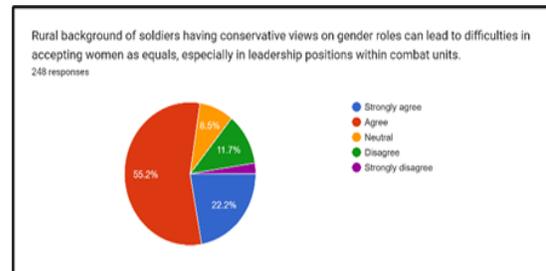
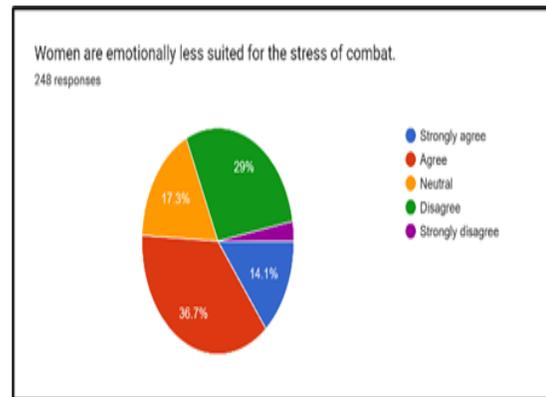


Figure 6: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: Women are emotionally less suited for the stress of combat than men?”



The survey revealed that conservative views made it difficult to accept women as equals in leadership roles within combat units. Additionally, many respondents felt that women were emotionally less suited for the stress of combat compared to men, indicative of a patriarchal societal mindset.

E. Gender Biases Within the Military

An overwhelming majority of respondents felt that women in combat units might have to constantly prove their capabilities or face skepticism about their ability to lead and perform under pressure (Figure 7). Most respondents felt that women in

combat units might face discrimination and prejudice (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: Women in combat units may have to constantly prove their capabilities and face skepticism about their ability to lead and perform under pressure.”

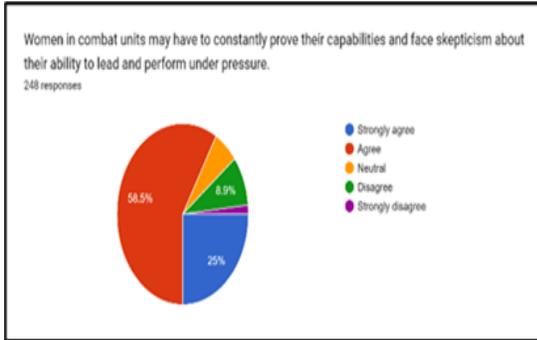
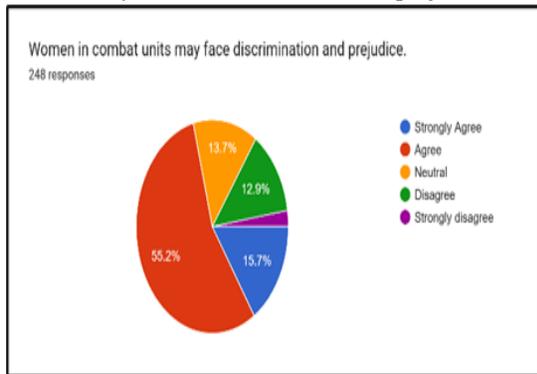


Figure 8: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: Women in combat units may face discrimination and prejudice?”



The survey indicated that women in combat units might face doubt and the necessity to continually demonstrate their abilities, frequently encountering bias and prejudice.

F. Balancing Military Duties and Family Responsibilities

A significant majority strongly agreed that women in combat roles could face challenges balancing their military duties with family responsibilities (Figure 9). There was also a strong perception that societal expectations might discourage women from pursuing combat roles (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: Women in combat roles could face challenges balancing military duties with family responsibilities?”

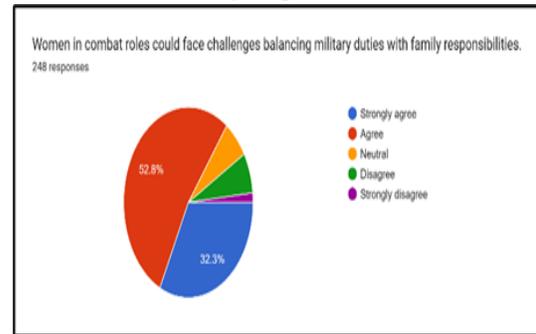
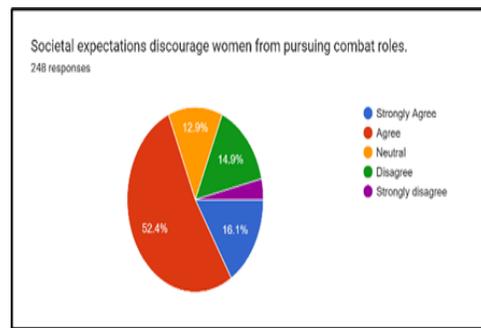


Figure 10: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: Societal expectations discourage women from pursuing combat roles?”



The survey indicated that there was a public perception that women in combat roles might encounter difficulties balancing their military duties with family responsibilities and might be deterred by societal expectations.

G. Concerns about Unit Cohesion

The survey threw up a mixed response to the question whether women's presence in combat units might create tensions and negatively impact unit cohesion. 36 percent respondents agreed with the notion, 39 percent disagreed, and 25 percent respondents were neutral (Figure 11).

Similarly, only 44 percent respondents believed that the presence of women in combat units might challenge traditional male bonding and camaraderie, which could affect unit morale and esprit de corps. The balance respondents were neutral in their views or disagreed with the statement (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: Women’s presence in combat units might create tensions and negatively impact unit cohesion?”

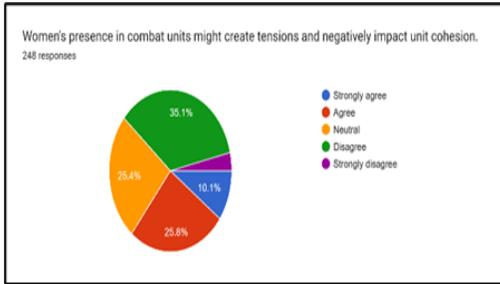
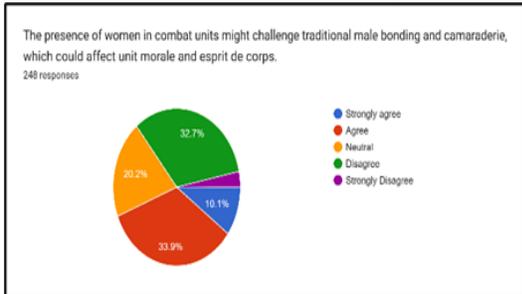


Figure 12: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: The presence of women in combat units might challenge traditional male bonding and camaraderie, which could affect unit morale and esprit de corps?”



The survey revealed diverse perspectives regarding the potential impact of women's inclusion in combat units on unit cohesion.

H. Stereotyped Media Portrayal

Most respondents felt that media does not portray women in the military accurately (Figure 13). A majority of people believed that media portrayal of women reinforced stereotypes and hindered the acceptance of women in combat roles (Figure 14).

Figure 13: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: The media portrays women in the military accurately?”

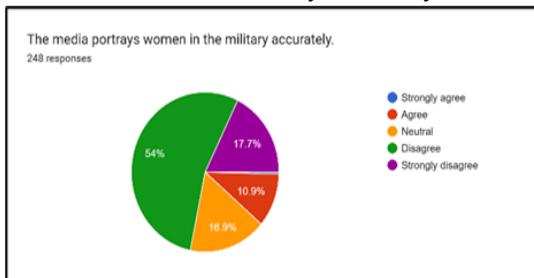
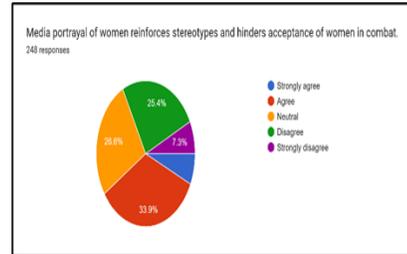


Figure 14: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: Media portrayal of women reinforces stereotypes and hinders acceptance of women in combat?”



The survey indicated that media representation of women perpetuated stereotypes and affected their acceptance in combat roles.

I. Benefits of Women in Combat Roles

Most respondents did not believe that including women in combat roles would enhance the effectiveness of the Indian military (Figure 15). However, they did acknowledge that women could bring different perspectives, skill sets, and leadership styles to the table. Additionally, many respondents felt that having women in combat roles would promote gender equality within the armed forces and address the demands of modern conflict (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Response to the question “To what extent do you agree with the statement: Women inclusion in combat roles will enhance the Indian military’s effectiveness?”

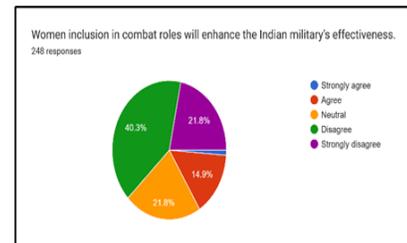
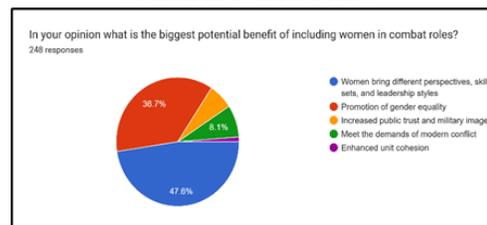


Figure 16: Response to the question “In your opinion what is the biggest potential benefit of including women in combat roles?”



VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Including women in combat roles offers several potential advantages to the Indian Armed Forces and the society. Optimum realization of these advantages requires careful planning and implementation. The Armed Forces need to address the challenges related to integration, training, and support to ensure that all personnel, regardless of gender, are given the opportunity to succeed. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes:

- (a) **Challenging Societal Attitudes:** The Armed Forces need to promote gender equality and challenge traditional gender roles through education and awareness campaigns. This would involve engaging with communities, schools, and media to highlight the achievements and capabilities of women in combat roles. By showcasing positive examples and success stories, society can begin to change its perceptions and break down the stereotypes that have long hindered the acceptance of women in the Armed Forces. In addition, collaboration with civil society organizations and prominent people can strengthen these efforts by ensuring that the message of gender equality reaches a wider audience and creates a permanent impact.
- (b) **Creating Inclusive Military Culture:** Developing an inclusive environment within the Armed Forces involves several key considerations. First, it is essential to implement policies against gender discrimination and harassment, ensuring that all service personnel are treated with respect and dignity. This includes establishing a clear reporting chain for any incidents of impartiality or harassment and providing support for those affected. Second, promoting gender inclusion through targeted recruitment efforts is essential. By actively seeking to recruit women into various roles within the military, the Armed Forces can demonstrate their commitment to gender equality and create a more balanced workforce. Third, providing education and training on gender equality to all military personnel can help to raise awareness and foster a culture of respect and understanding. This can include workshops, seminars and courses that cover topics such as

unconscious bias and the benefits of a gender inclusive environment.

- (c) **Providing Custom-made Training and Support:** Developing training programs that cater to the specific needs of women in combat roles is essential to ensure their successful integration and performance. This includes physical training that considers the different physiological needs of women, as well as tactical training that boosts their combat readiness and effectiveness. Additionally, providing access to mentorship and support can help women navigate the unique challenges they may face in the military. These mentors can offer guidance, share experiences, and provide support, contributing to their overall well-being and career development. Furthermore, creating programs that focus on leadership development and career advancement can empower women to take on more significant roles within the Armed Forces.
- (d) **Addressing Logistical Challenges:** Ensuring that appropriate facilities and accommodations are available for women in all operational environments is crucial. This includes designing and providing separate living quarters, sanitary facilities, and privacy considerations to meet the needs of female personnel. Additionally, essential logistical adjustments such as uniform and gear customization to fit women's body types and ensuring the availability of necessary medical care, including gynecological services, are important aspects of integration. By addressing these logistical challenges, the Armed Forces can create a supportive environment that allows women to perform their duties effectively and comfortably.
- (e) **Addressing Misrepresentation and Stereotyped Media Portrayal:** The Armed Forces must create a mechanism to monitor media representation of women in the military and address any misrepresentations or biased portrayals by providing feedback to media organizations. Encouraging more responsible reporting can help ensure that the media accurately reflects the realities of women in combat roles. The Armed Forces can work closely with journalists,

filmmakers, and other media professionals to ensure accurate and balanced portrayal of women in combat roles. Providing access to real-life stories, facilitating interviews, and sharing positive experiences can help create more nuanced and realistic representations.

By proactively addressing these challenges, the Indian Armed Forces can create a more inclusive environment for women serving in combat roles, ultimately strengthening the Armed Forces as a whole.

VII. CONCLUSION

The induction of women into combat roles within the Indian Armed Forces is a multifaceted issue that is deeply linked with social and cultural factors. A concerted effort in education and awareness is needed to overcome societal attitudes and deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. At the same time, promoting gender neutrality and highlighting the contributions of women within the Armed Forces will facilitate broader societal acceptance of women serving in combat roles. Within the Armed Forces, robust policies against discrimination and harassment are essential for developing a respectful and supportive environment for all service personnel. Flexible training programs that address the specific needs of women combatants would enhance their integration and performance. Logistical modifications would ensure the effectiveness of women personnel in various operational settings. Likewise, accurate and nuanced media portrayals can help change public perceptions and support the broader acceptance of women in combat roles.

Although the journey toward full integration is tough, the potential benefits are considerable. Ultimately, the decision of whether or not to allow women to serve in combat roles is a complex one having significant implications for both individual soldiers and the Armed Forces as a whole. By addressing the social and cultural factors thoughtfully and progressively, the Indian Armed Forces can pave the way for a stronger and more inclusive future.

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