

# Redefining the warrior — and remaking bunkers — to include women

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Supreme Court judgments and Central government policy have strongly reinforced equal opportunities for men and women in the armed forces and as the door opens for women in what were otherwise considered quintessential male bastions, the Indian Armed Forces must take on the challenge head-on.



PREMIUM

Several militaries have all branches open to women. The ultimate goal for any military should be a gender-neutral and merit-driven entry system, taking into account the physiology of the individual for fitness tests. (PTI)

Commencing with the entry of women into the armed forces (in non-medical roles) in the early 1990s as short-service commission officers, the shibboleths of hierarchy have been difficult to shake off. At present, women are recruited in the military police, girls are allowed to enrol into the National Defence Academy and Sainik Schools, women officers are being granted a permanent commission and bestowed with command of units and are recruited in ranks below officers as part of the Agniveer scheme.

Notwithstanding the above, mindsets continue to suffer from a sense of patriarchy that has inhibited women's entry to some branches of the Army like special forces, infantry, and armoured corps. The justifications cited are related to tough battle situations in which these arms function. The Air Force has inducted women pilots in all types of aircraft, and the Navy

is all set to induct women sailors onboard submarine units from the upcoming Agniveer batches. The trend of opening combat arms to women is likely to gain traction in all three services.

What this means is that issues related to crew/bunk management, accommodation, and privacy, particularly in highly restricted work spaces, or in combat zones, will have to be addressed first for the optimum realisation of equal opportunities.

Having said that, it is important to examine what it takes to provide equal opportunity for all, beyond meeting infrastructural requirements.

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Over the last few decades, sub-conventional, stability and peace support operations have gained traction as common military tasks. In community and key leader engagement, cyber warfare, tech-dominated engagements, intelligence and other arenas, the presence of women should be seen as redefining the label of warrior.

In spite of a re-defined battlefield, our mindsets continue to be rigid, thereby not accepting women as fellow combatants in operations.

Traditionally, effectiveness in conventional warfare has overemphasised physical factors, which, with innovative modern technology is no longer as applicable as other skills. The system shall have to fit the woman warrior in the shape that suits her, and there exists no dearth of such positions. Their expertise-specific charter in operations will be a force multiplier towards the overall unit performance.

Former Northern Army Commander Lieutenant General HS Panag has suggested several measures including an all-encompassing study to frame a policy for entry, training, fitness standards, terms/conditions and management of women in the armed forces. The criteria to select and test a woman in the military ought to be different and this needs to be the standard, not as a dole or a largesse, but as a measure for good results. Now more than ever, we need to include women in all roles to prevent, respond to and resolve conflict. Women warriors can perform tasks in stability operations, sub-conventional / proxy war scenarios and disaster relief missions. To achieve this, the cultural challenge will be to wean all ranks away from the cult of the male warrior, where women have no place.

The military is ultimately a mirror image of society in civvies, and the changing face of women in civil society shall positively influence the age-old mindset of soldiers. The troops will be more than willing to be led by competent women leaders as they would be reluctant to be led by incompetent male leaders.

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