

From Margins to Mainstream: Social Inclusion of Women in Strategic and Defence Roles

Dr. Harsimran Kaur

Assistant Professor, Defence & strategic studies

RIMT University, Mandi Gobindgrah, Punjab

Abstract

Institutional exclusion, gendered views of combat, and sociocultural norms have long limited the involvement of women in strategic and defence roles in India. But recent changes like the Decision of Supreme Court on permanent commissions and the opening of combat positions signify a big step in the direction of gender inclusion. This chapter uses sociological theories of intersectionality, empowerment, and inclusion to critically analyze these developments. It draws attention to the ways that caste, class, and geography interact with gender to impact access to careers in the defence industry. Cultural resistance and symbolic inclusion, which persist despite legal advancements, constrain real change. The chapter examines how important it is for educational institutions and defence academies to promote gender-sensitive teaching, leadership training, and an understanding the contributions of women to national security. It promotes focused policy interventions to address structural barriers and highlights the necessity of curriculum reforms that incorporate gender and defence studies. The chapter demonstrates how inclusive education and institutional change can mainstream women in defence by referencing policy reviews, case studies, and the real-life experiences of female officers. Inclusion of Women is ultimately a strategic imperative that is essential to creating a robust, future-ready security framework in India and elsewhere. It goes beyond simple representation.

Keywords: *Gender Inclusion, Defence Studies, Strategic Roles, Sociological Barriers, Empowerment through Education, Policy and Pedagogical Reforms*

Introduction

Many societies, including India, have traditionally viewed defence and strategic affairs as the exclusive domain of men. The military has historically praised masculine values such as physical strength, aggression, and authority while relegating women to supporting roles like nursing, administration, or voluntary work during times of war (Banerjee, 2019; Enloe, 2014). This gendered division of labour strengthened long-standing preconceptions that

questioned the suitability of women for combat or leadership roles within defence institutions (Desai & Thakkar, 2001). However, the global discourse on gender and security has undergone a noticeable shift in the twenty-first century. Traditional military structures have been contested by various factors, including international commitments to rights, judicial activism, socio-political movements of women to support gender equality, and changing warfare dynamics (Basu, 2021). Representation of women in the defence of India has progressed from symbolic inclusion to a more real, albeit still contentious, presence in roles related to combat, intelligence, cyber defence, and strategic policymaking.

Present chapter aims to investigate this shift by learning about the underlying sociological currents that influence experiences of women in the defence and strategic industries of India rather than just analyzing policy. In addition to examining the structural and societal barriers that still exist, it looks at how institutional reforms, such as the decision of the Supreme Court on a permanent commission and the admission of women to the National Defence Academy, signify advancement. Crucially, the chapter highlights the intersectionality of gender with caste, class, and geographical factors that further complicate access and mobility for women in defence. It also emphasizes how crucial leadership development, inclusive pedagogy, and educational reforms are to normalizing the representation of women in defence narratives. The participation of women in strategic roles is no longer optional in the quickly changing security landscape; rather, it is crucial to creating a defence ecosystem that is capable, diverse, and resilient.

Historical Context and Gendered Stereotypes in Defence

The historical exclusion of women from active military service stemmed from long-standing gender biases that portrayed them as emotionally fragile, physically unfit, and unprepared for the demands of combat, a narrative that is ingrained in patriarchal ideology and societal conservatism (Butalia, 2016). Involvement of Women in defence in colonial India was mostly symbolic and limited to support roles like nursing, voluntary work, and nationalist activism rather than active participation in combat (Chatterjee, 2022). The military of India provided women with some opportunities after independence, but these were mostly restricted to non-combat divisions like the medical and education corps and short-service commissions. Although it appeared to be progressive, this selective inclusion served to uphold a gendered hierarchy that positioned women as supporters rather than defenders, thus reinforcing structural patriarchy within the military (Aggarwal, 2020). Opportunities were carefully

regulated within strict institutional boundaries and were presented less as rights and more as exceptions. This historic marginalization, where women were visible but not fully integrated, recognized but not empowered, set the tone for decades. Since the legacy of exclusion still shapes attitudes and policies today, achieving true inclusion is a deeply sociological issue that necessitates cultural change in both military and civilian institutions.

Legal and Policy Milestones

(i) Legal and Policy Milestones in Women’s Inclusion

The strict gender exclusivity of defence services of India has been progressively dismantled over the last three decades by a number of historic institutional and legal reforms. These changes reflect shifting public perceptions of women in uniform as well as a reaction to ongoing calls for gender parity.

- From 2010 on, women were progressively granted permanent commissions in a few branches, such as the Education Corps and JAG, but combat roles were still off-limits. A tokenistic approach was frequently evident in this partial inclusion, which offered space without actual authority or equality (Sinha, 2023). Without questioning the gendered hierarchies ingrained in the defence structure, the policy seemed to accommodate women (Basu, 2021).
- 2020: The Supreme Court of India made a landmark decision when it decided that all female Army officers qualified for Permanent Commission and could assume command roles (Supreme Court of India, 2020). The ruling in the case of Secretary, Ministry of Defence v. Babita Puniya & Ors. called for equal opportunity based on merit and harshly condemned the gender stereotypes that were used to support exclusion. The Court’s ruling that “women officers deserve equal opportunity” established a precedent that upheld the equality and nondiscrimination clauses of the constitution (Rajan, 2017).
- 2021: The first-ever admission of female candidates to the esteemed National Defence Academy (NDA) marked yet another significant advancement. Following a Supreme Court ruling, this action represented a dramatic institutional change that enabled women to start their training and career paths on par with men from the very beginning (Indian Army, 2023). It represented a change in philosophy regarding the

development of military leadership potential in India, in addition to policy inclusion (Radhakrishnan, 2021).

Sociological Barriers to Inclusion

The path to full inclusion is paved with ingrained social barriers that still limit the participation and advancement of women, even if legislative and policy changes in the defence industry of India have created opportunities for women. These issues are not only institutional also they are intersectional, cultural, and frequently unnoticed in the discussion of policy.

Views that are patriarchal

The most persistent obstacle is the persistent patriarchal mentality that casts doubt on the physical prowess, emotional fortitude, and strategic intelligence of women. Gender hierarchies in defence organizations are reinforced by the perception that women are “unfit” for frontline combat or command roles (Rajan, 2017). This cultural bias reduces roles of women to symbolic or supportive ones and is deeply embedded in peer attitudes, military training environments, and occasionally even among politicians themselves.

Tokenism

Inclusion of women is frequently only surface-level, even with greater recruiting. Women officers experience stagnation and disillusionment when token representation is used without supporting systems like mentorship, equal career tracks, and access to combat duties (Banerjee, 2019). Optics take precedence above operational empowerment in representation.

Inadequate Infrastructure and Workplace Hostility

The lack of privacy in training camps, gender-insensitive facilities, and insufficient grievance redressal procedures are only a few examples of the structural obstacles that women still confront. Because of professional stigma or fear of reprisals, verbal and physical harassment incidents are frequently not reported (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2022). These lead to a hazardous and unfair workplace.

The Intersection of Region, Caste, and Class

When caste, class, and geography are taken into consideration, the exclusion of women is exacerbated. In addition to being women in a field that is dominated by males, women from marginalized communities also experience prejudice since they belong to historically excluded groups. Recruitment, training access, language proficiency, and socioeconomic preparedness are all impacted by this multifaceted disadvantage (Butalia, 2016).

Cultural Opposition in Peers and Leadership

Implicit biases held by peers and senior officers frequently hinder gender integration and have an impact on field duties, assignments, and postings (Ghosh, 2020). The military’s “brotherhood” ethos has not yet developed into an inclusive comradeship culture.

Table: Key Sociological Barriers to Women’s Inclusion in Defence

Barrier	Description	Impact	Suggested Reforms
Patriarchal Attitudes	Gendered views on capability and leadership	Limits women’s participation in command and combat roles	Gender-sensitization training, leadership by example (Rajan, 2017)
Tokenism	Inclusion without adequate institutional support	Lack of promotion, stagnation, and disillusionment	Career mapping, combat role access, policy-to-practice accountability (Banerjee, 2019)
Workplace Hostility	Harassment, unsafe environments, inadequate facilities	Mental stress, early exits from service	Grievance cells, infrastructure improvements (Ministry of WCD, 2022)
Intersectionality	Disadvantages based on caste, class, region	Unequal access to defence opportunities	Affirmative action, inclusive outreach (Butalia, 2016)
Cultural Resistance	Peer and leadership bias against gender integration	Exclusion from core missions and operational units	Institutional audits, diverse leadership (Ghosh, 2020)

These sociological obstacles demonstrate that policies alone cannot bring about gender inclusion. A cultural change in military culture, inclusive institutional design, and systems that recognize and address the distinct experiences of women, particularly those from intersectional disadvantaged backgrounds that are necessary for true transformation.

Women in Intelligence and Strategic Positions

Involvement of Women in traditional military roles is still developing, but in recent years, their involvement in the strategic and intelligence domains has shown great promise. Beyond the battlefield, these positions are essential to defence planning and national security.

- **Principal Domains of Participation:** Women are joining cybersecurity and digital surveillance teams, helping with cyber threat analysis, data encryption, and counter-cyberattack tactics—all crucial in the current hybrid warfare environment (Sinha, 2023).
- **Intelligence and Internal Security:** RAW, the Intelligence Bureau, and the Indian Police Service (IPS) all have female officers who actively participate in risk assessments, counterterrorism operations, and intelligence collection. Despite being crucial to national security, their contributions are frequently kept secret (Ghosh, 2020).
- **Diplomacy and Defence Policy:** The Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Defence have appointed women to strategic policy positions. A significant turning point in the history of gender representation at the highest level of defence leadership was reached during Nirmala Sitharaman’s tenure as India’s defence minister from 2017 to 2019 (Basu, 2021).
- Indian women have participated in UN peacekeeping operations as military and police observers, frequently in unstable areas like South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their presence makes the mission more credible and makes it easier to interact with local communities (Ghosh, 2020).

Challenges:

- Despite these successes, the strategic roles of women are still frequently underrepresented in textbooks, public discourse, and defence training curricula.

- Military pedagogy, which still emphasizes male-dominated leadership models, hardly ever acknowledges or institutionalizes their contributions (Basu, 2021).

Important Suggestions for Curriculum Reform:

Curriculum Reforms and Educational Interventions

In order to combat gender biases and promote inclusive participation in the defence and strategic sectors, education is a game-changer. Value-based, inclusive, and multidisciplinary education that fosters equity in all fields—including security and defence—is essential, according to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Include Gender Studies and Military Sociology:

Undergraduate and graduate programs that incorporate military sociology and gender perspectives can assist students in critically analyzing institutional biases, power dynamics, and the role of women in defence (Verma, 2022).

Emphasize the contributions made by women to defence textbooks:

More visibility and recognition will be ensured by updating academic materials to incorporate historical and modern accounts of women in leadership, intelligence, peacekeeping, and combat (Desai & Thakkar, 2001).

Extend NCC and Girls' Leadership Programs: Young women will develop confidence and leadership skills if the National Cadet Corps (NCC) programs are strengthened and equal access to field training, adventure activities, and defence exposure is given (Sinha, 2023).

Encourage Defence and Gender Research through Fellowships: To support empirical research and evidence-based policymaking, the government should provide funding for fellowships and scholarships aimed at women in strategic leadership, security, and conflict studies (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2022).

Important Reform Areas:

- Policies for Inclusive Hiring

- An important change occurred in 2021 when the NDA opened up to female candidates (Indian Army, 2023).
- To guarantee access for women from all socioeconomic backgrounds, equal representation in entrance exams and open selection procedures are crucial (Radhakrishnan, 2021).
- Training Modules That Are Gender-Sensitive
- Diversity education, anti-harassment procedures, and gender sensitization should all be included in training curricula (Banerjee, 2019).
- This aids in dispelling long-standing myths regarding women’s aptitude for command and combat roles.
- Programs for Leadership Development and Mentoring
- Cadets can be guided through the unique challenges faced by women in the defence industry by structured mentorship networks, particularly with senior female officers.
- Regardless of gender, leadership development must be merit-based and promote competence and confidence (Radhakrishnan, 2021).
- Reforms in Culture and Infrastructure
- To support female cadets, adequate facilities for housing, sanitary conditions, and physical training should be established.
- Women must be acknowledged as equal participants in strategic roles rather than as anomalies in institutional culture.
- Equitable Access to Core Operational Roles and Combat
- Women must be given active combat responsibilities based on their performance and ability, not just symbolic roles (Banerjee, 2019).

- This is consistent with the 2020 Supreme Court decision that upheld the eligibility of female officers for permanent commissions and command positions.

Important Takeaways for India

These best practices can help India by:

- establishing performance and physical standards that are gender-neutral.
- putting in place anti-discrimination and gender training programs for the entire organization.
- promoting fair representation in positions involving strategic planning, combat, and decision-making.
- India can establish itself as a regional leader in gender integration within the armed forces by embracing substantive reforms and going beyond symbolic inclusion.

The Importance of Strategic Media Representation

Educational Integration: To normalize participation of women in defence roles, documentaries and movies that show women in uniform can be incorporated into lectures at colleges and universities.

Social Media Campaigns: To showcase the achievements of female officers, defence organizations can work with media platforms and influencers.

1. Defence Institutions' Gender Audits

To evaluate inclusivity, infrastructure, and leadership representation, military academies, operational units, and administrative departments must institutionalize regular gender audits. (Ministry of Child Development and Women, 2022). These audits ought to assess hiring trends, advancement paths, and gender-neutral working conditions.

2. Selection Based on Merit with Equitable Institutional Assistance

Women must have equal access to training, mentorship, and logistical support, such as maternity benefits, safe housing, and combat-preparation equipment, even though selection

should continue to be meritocratic. Radhakrishnan (2021). Eliminating institutional bias guarantees that leadership pathways are determined by competence rather than gender.

3. Mechanisms for Resolving Grievances and Harassment

Strong Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs), private reporting avenues, and retaliation protection are essential in military settings. Radhakrishnan (2021). In systems that have historically been dominated by men, these mechanisms guarantee that women feel safe and empowered.

4. Campaigns to Raise Awareness of Rural and Marginalized Girls

In rural areas, information campaigns that highlight careers in the defence industry and are distributed in local languages through community centres, schools, and online platforms can aid in removing sociocultural barriers. (Sinha, 2023)

5. Research and Training Collaborations with Academic Institutions

If these policy changes are applied comprehensively, they can foster an inclusive military environment where women flourish not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of strategic command and influence.

Ascent of Women from the periphery to the centre of defence and strategic circles of India is becoming a reality rather than a pipe dream. When a woman enters a combat unit, intelligence cell, or command post, she is not only shattering stereotypes but also rewriting the rules of national security. The goal of inclusion in defence is to unleash the full potential of a country's talent, not to meet quotas. Women who hold leadership positions in strategy rooms and on the front lines contribute fresh viewpoints, resiliency, and flexibility and qualities that the future of warfare requires. When presence of women in defence roles feels normal rather than noteworthy and when competence, not gender, shapes leadership, there will be true change. We can create an environment where every young girl sees herself not only as a participant but also as a protector, a planner, and a trailblazer if our institutions, classrooms, and culture give it the proper push.

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