



Breaking Barriers: The Bravery of Indian Women in Military Operations

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ABSTRACT

This article covers the vital role of women in the Indian Armed Forces particularly in the context of India's 4 conflicts with Pakistan and in Operation Sindoor after the Pahalgam incident. The article places emphasis on their combat and non-combat back-office role in terms of their courage, resilience, and in systemic removal of obstacles. Earlier Rani Laxhmi bai and others. And now in contemporary terms. Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, Flight Lieutenant Gunjan Saxena, Colonel Sofia Qureshi, and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh and others. The article stresses how women shattered gender stereotypes, revolutionized military tactics, and inspired young generation. Even as women succeeded, they continue to face to battle societal biases and institutional barriers, highlighting the need for greater inclusion within the military culture.

Introduction

The Indian Defence Forces have traditionally been a male-dominated organization, but women have made a place for themselves through sheer determination and grit, especially in war. From the battlefields of the Indo-Pak Wars, the rugged terrain of the Sino-Indian border war, and recent counter-insurgency operations after the Pahalgam attack, women have performed multifaceted roles as combatants, front-line supporters, office managers, and back-office strategists. Their roles not only supported India's military efforts but also defied entrenched gender norms.



Peep in the past

Legendary Goddess Durga and Kali, Mahabharata’s Draupadi, Savitri defeated Yamraaj (God of Death) for her husband, and Rani Lakshmi bai, Ahilya Bai, Rani Durgawati fought with Mughals, Begam Hajrat Mahal fought against British East India Company, Azad Hind Fauz’s Laxmi Sehgal yester years are few example of Indian women who demonstrated strength, ferocity, determination, and leadership qualities. Contemporary Indian women are challenged by gender violence and discrimination in our society. Recent study shows 31% of sample witnessing workplace discrimination where 26% of then suffer domestic violence.¹ Durga's victory over Mahishasura encourages women entrepreneurs to break the scepticism in society. Kali’s ferocity encourages them to seek justice, while Draupadi’s strategic influence inspires women politicians to advocate for gender-sensitive policies. Lakshmibai’s leadership drives female athletes to break barriers in sports.²

Data Sheet: Gender Violence and Discrimination Against Women in Contemporary India

Category	Data / Statistics (Recent Years)	Source
Total Crimes Against Women (2022)	4,45,256 cases registered, a 4% increase over 2021	National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2023 Report
Other Major Crimes Reported (2025)	Assault: 950 complaints; Dowry harassment: 916; Rape and attempt to rape: 394; Molestation: 310; Sexual harassment: 302; Cybercrimes: 110	NCW data, Business Standard, May 2025
Crime Rate per 100,000 Women (2022)	66.4 nationally; Delhi highest at 144.4; Uttar Pradesh highest number of FIRs (65,743)	NCRB 2022 data analysis



Category	Data / Statistics (Recent Years)	Source
Spousal Violence	32% of ever-married women aged 18-49 experienced spousal violence; 29% faced physical/sexual violence by spouse	National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5)
Help-Seeking Behavior	Only 14% of women experiencing violence seek help from police or social workers	NFHS-5 and social studies
Psychological and Health Impact	GBV leads to depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance abuse, chronic pain, reproductive health issues	Indian Express analysis, 2025

Women of India-Pakistan Wars: A Legacy of Bravery

India-Pakistan wars of 1947, 1965, 1971, and the 1999 Kargil war were landmark events in Indian military history, where women played a vital non-combat role. During the 1947-48 Indo-Pak war, women were employed primarily in medical duties. Women nurses were deployed by the Army Medical Corps (AMC) in the field hospitals in Kashmir to treat wounded soldiers. Their efforts guaranteed early recovery of soldiers, and boosted their morale and operational capabilities were. Their work saved many lives, at the cost of being exposed to enemy fire.³

The 1962 Sino-Indian War, which took place in the harsh weather conditions of Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, put the Indian army to unprecedented hardships. Women, though not in the frontlines, had crucial supporting roles. AMC nurses such as Lieutenant Anjali Gupta risked sub-zero temperatures to deliver frostbite and bullet wound treatment in the forward lines. The women operated make-shift hospitals with minimal equipment, sometimes walking miles to treat injured soldiers. Their dedication



ensured the soldiers were combat-ready in spite of the hardships.⁴ Nurses like Captain Nirmala Devi attended to wounded soldiers in field hospitals near the front in Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh, sometimes in challenging conditions.⁵ Working behind the scenes in back-office positions, women of the Army Service Corps (ASC) operated supply lines, bringing in food, ammunition, and medical supplies to the front. They were clerks and administrators in military headquarters, processing operational reports, coordinating troop deployments, and keeping lines of communication open. Their efforts, though equally essential, were substantially overshadowed by men's reporting, a demonstration of gender biases of the day.⁶

By the 1965 and 1971 conflicts, women's roles increased. The Military Nursing Service (MNS), which was formed in 1926, became the backbone of war medicine. Women also provided an indirect input through the Women's Auxiliary Corps (India), established during World War II.⁷ Nurses such as Captain Radhika Menon worked day and night in forward surgical units, sometimes in the line of fire, to stabilize wounded soldiers.⁸ Besides medical duties, women in back-office roles coordinated logistics, communications, and intelligence analysis. For example, during the 1971 war, women in the Intelligence Corps decrypted vital messages that assisted India in outmanoeuvring Pakistani forces to establish Bangladesh. Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal, a veteran of the Indian National Army (INA) and a doctor, established refugee medical camps in East Pakistan. She not only provided relief but also raised the morale of Indian troops.⁹ Women nurses in the AMC during the 1965 war worked in the forward areas, treating soldiers wounded in battles like the Battle of Haji Pir Pass. Their bravery was exemplified by Sister Kamla Devi, who kept working when an enemy air raid occurred on a military hospital in Punjab, and the Army commended her.¹⁰

The 1999 Kargil War marked a turning point for women combatants. Indian Air Force (IAF) pilot Flight Lieutenant Gunjan Saxena was the first female pilot to fly in combat.¹¹ Saxena flew Cheetah helicopters, conducting reconnaissance, evacuating wounded personnel, and delivering supplies to soldiers in the Dras sector under intense enemy fire. Saxena was decorated with the Shaurya Chakra for her courage and went on to become the face of women's potential in combat. Saxena's act of bravery was awarded the Shaurya Chakra, the first woman in the IAF to receive this gallantry award.¹²

Similarly, Flight Lieutenant Srividya Rajan, another batchmate of Saxena's, who flew war-time reconnaissance sorties, providing ground intelligence on which artillery fire was directed, was also



treated with suspicion by her male peers and denied institutional support, permanent commissions among them, which women in the IAF did not receive until 2015.¹³

Overview of women in combat roles in the militaries of the Other Countries.

Here is an chart summarizing the approximate percentage of women and men in combat or active military roles for the USA, Israel, Norway, Britain, Australia, Brazil, and Russia based on available data from 2022-2023. The figures reflect women’s overall representation in armed forces, which includes combat roles where women are allowed, and men’s corresponding percentages.

Sr. No.	Country Name	% of women in combat	% of men in combat
1	USA	~17% (women in active duty overall)	~83%
2	ISRAEL	~33% (women serve in combat roles)	~67%
3	NORWAY	~12.7% (NATO average, close to Norway)	~87.3%
4	BRITAIN	~11-13%	~87-89%
5	AUSTRALIA	~15%	~85%
6	BRAZIL	~10%	~90%
7	RUSSIA	~4-5%	~95-96%
8	INDIA	~3.8% (Army), ~13% (Air Force), ~6% (Navy)	~96.2%, ~87%, ~94%

Sources : ¹⁴

PAHALGAM INCIDENT AND OP. SINDOOR

The April 22, 2025, terror attack on Pahalgam and the death of 26 civilians was yet another milestone for India's anti-terror efforts. In a retaliatory act, the Indian Armed Forces launched Operation Sindoor, a



joint, multi-service, coordinated raid on terrorist structures in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. Operation Sindoor was a 24-missile strike by the three military forces, a new milestone in terms of gender integration, with Colonel Sofia Qureshi and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh commanding the operation.

Qureshi, an Army officer, and Singh, an IAF officer, spoke to the international media on the success of the mission, demonstrating their strategic worth in mission planning and execution. Qureshi, a counter insurgency expert, had mapped out the strategic goals, while Singh led the air strikes with accuracy. Their leadership not only shattered the terrorist syndicates but also sent a powerful message about the capabilities of women as combat leaders. Operation Sindoor also had women in office positions. Women officers within the Defence Intelligence Agency processed satellite imagery and intercepted communications, generating actionable intelligence that informed the operation's strategy. Their analytical skill ensured that the strikes were accurate, limiting collateral damage while maximizing effect.

Captain Tania Shergill, the first woman to lead an all-male contingent in the Republic Day parade of 2020, has been sent to forward locations along the LoC. Her participation in counter-insurgency operations in Jammu and Kashmir is proof of increased acceptance of women in tactical deployments.¹⁵ In Army Service Corps (ASC) and Ordnance Corps (AOC) women officers have also played a crucial role in maintaining supply lines to remote posts along the LoC. For instance, Major Priya Jhingan, who was one of the first women in the Indian Army in 1993, has trained women recruits to handle logistics at high altitudes to keep troops well-prepared during harsh winters.¹⁶ The Border Security Force (BSF) now also has women constables on patrol duty along the LoC, which was once the exclusive domain of men. These women, hailing from rural village backgrounds, have adapted to the physical and psychological challenges of border security, and their peers have started to respect them.¹⁷

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SINDOOR

Sindoor is a holy vermilion powder of red color where conveys love, strength, and protection. It also values loyalty and fidelity and a Symbol of Courage (PM Modi say's).¹⁸

Combat and Non-combat task spectrum

Women in uniform have participated in all kind of wartime duties, all of which were integral to success in operations. In combat roles, pioneers like Gunjan Saxena fought head-on inside war zones. As Flight



Lieutenant Gunjan Saxena said in a 2022 interview, "When young girls see women like us in uniform, they believe they can achieve anything."¹⁹

While in administrative jobs, women have performed well in administration and strategic planning. During Indo-Pak wars, women officers in military headquarters coordinated with field units, prepared reports, and handled operational logistics. Currently, officers such as those who participated in Operation Sindoor conduct intelligence analysis and media briefings to facilitate effective communication between the military and the public. Back-office careers, while less in the spotlight, are just as vital. ASC and admin unit women have directed supply chains, personnel records, and budgets in times of war.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite their contribution, women serving in the Indian Armed Forces have not been without their problems. Societal stereotypes have questioned their physical ability to fight for decades, from resistance to their use in combat roles until the 1990s. Even post-2020 court judgment, cultural assumptions continue to exist where military service is not seen as being compatible with traditional notions of gender roles. Institutional constraints have also proved challenging. Women thus have been relegated to the second line, with limited possibilities of command. Lack of infrastructure, such as gender-specific facilities in the forward locations, has also complicated their integration. In addition, harmonization of military duties with home duties remains a challenge, since women officers will likely be summoned to fulfill home duties. Further, women deployed in forward areas have inferior facilities, including separate toilets and sanitation, which impacts their operational efficiency and morale.²⁰

Social pressures also enter the scene. Most women officers are subjected to family pressures to put marriage and motherhood ahead of their career. Captain Divya Ajith, the first woman to command an Army parade, described in an interview in 2023 how she went against her family's desires to remain in the army.²¹ These issues put into perspective the necessity for system reforms to facilitate women in the military.

Legacy and Road Ahead

The 2020 Supreme Court ruling to award permanent commissions to women has since opened doors to further combat roles. In spite of their contribution, women face monumental challenges in the course of today's military operations. Gender stereotypes continue with the majority of the male officers doubting



the physical strength of women for combat-like situations. A 2024 Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) poll determined that 45% of the male soldiers assumed women were "less suited" for front-line operations, citing physical strength and emotional resilience as the basis.²² This prejudice is typically exhibited in offering women fewer opportunities for showing themselves in high-stress operations.

In the coming years, the Indian Defence Forces need to do more to dispel stereotypes by making gender-sensitive infrastructure investments, sponsoring women officers, and eliminating social myths. Acknowledgment and celebration of the role of women in war efforts—combat, front-line, office, or back-office postings—will pave the way for a balanced army.

Conclusion

Indian Armed Forces' women have broken the odds to take a leading part in India's wartime contributions, from the Indo-Pak wars and the 1962 Sino-Indian War to Operation Sindoor in recent times. As front-line fighters, front-line enablers, office administrators, and back-office strategists, their contributions have contributed to military victories. In the face of societal and institutional challenges, women like Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, Flight Lieutenant Gunjan Saxena, Colonel Sofia Qureshi, and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh have displayed unprecedented courage, breaking glass ceilings and establishing new benchmarks for gender integration. As India moves forward, acknowledging these unsung heroines and addressing their problems will make the armed forces a true mirror of the nation's diversity and strength.

EndNote:

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