

## PREDOMINANT ROLE OF WOMEN IN MILITARY SECTORS: A CASE STUDY OF RUSSIA BEFORE & AFTER DISINTEGRATION

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**Abstract:** History shows that men have invariably claimed superiority in various sectors like Government, military etc. They have tried to take the upper hand in every field. But now with the ongoing process of time, this stereotypical concept has started to change. Since the 21st century a sizable number of nations have witnessed a rise in the role played by women in military sectors. Despite of countless limitations and controversies in the armed forces currently the women have started to involve themselves very confidently in the modernized armed forces. Today many nations are increasing the role of female combatants and thus the debate goes on. In this connection the paper would make an attempt to highlight the role of women combatants in past and in 21st century. It would also give a brief idea about the discriminations faced by women in military sectors. Lastly, ability v/s gender is no more valid for military sectors and why it is so that would be another major focus of this paper. All these matters will be discussed from the context of Russian military before and after disintegration.

**Keywords:** Women in Soviet military; women in Russian military; gender discriminations in military sectors; challenging traditions.

**Introduction:** Till a short while ago there was a notion that the right to fight and capability to lead wars only belongs to the male. This preconceived notion was so strong that in most of the countries only men were allowed to engage themselves in military sectors. The stereotypical notion of society accepts the role of women only in the domestic matters. Although in very rare cases they have participated in military conflicts as a soldier and mostly even these soldiers had to sacrifice their combatant roles, only to go back to their domestic arena. From the very past, society has differentiated between the work in the formal economy and the private and the domestic work. But unfortunately this differentiation doesn't end there; it has created gender discrimination as well. It has been a decided fact that men are supposed to work outside house and women are born to engage themselves only in domestic works.

The conventional notion of men as 'just warriors' and women as 'beautiful souls' is the dominant factor behind the gender inequalities (Elshtain 1995). Once Dorothy Heights the civil rights and women's rights activist said, 'I want to be remembered as someone who used herself and anything she could touch to work for justice and freedom. I want to be remembered as one who tried.' For the last few decades the preconceived notion of patriarchal society has been challenged by the increasing number of women's participation in the military sectors as well as other employment sectors. Recently in the modernized Western countries the feminist thinkers have played a very important role against the patriarchal society by various women's movements and by increasing the conscious thinking and

confidence of women. Russia is one of those Western countries where women participation in the military sectors has seen a increase in the 21st century.

**Women in the Soviet military:** In Soviet military women were not taken as recognized fighters. In fact in most of the cases they had to play a minor role in the armed forces. Earlier majority of the time men joined in mainstream Soviet military while women were given roles to help the troops as cooks, nurses, laundresses, seamstresses, and messengers. However in spite of all these drawbacks Soviet Union was one of the first modernized nations to involve women broadly in its mainstream armed forces. During World War I and World War II women participated as 'women soldiers' (Broido 1977). In World War II twenty three women air fighters named 'Heroes of the Soviet Union' because they flew combat aircraft and fought bravely till the end (Wagner 1973).

- Initially the number of women fighters was not very much in Soviet Russia but it started to grow when Soviet Russia lost the battle of Tanenberg. That time Maria Bochkareva built a women's battalion known as 'Women's battalion of Death'. This battalion fought against the German forces in 1917 but unfortunately it was destroyed. Even after that the existence of this battalion was not completely finished, it re-emerged as the First Petrograd Women's Ballalion and again after the Bolshevik Revolution it was destroyed.
- Although in other nations during World War II women participated only in subordinate sectors but in case of Soviet Russia women participated in mainstream armed forces. They provided help as aviators, partisans, air fighters, machine gunners, land forces and many more. During this period

more than 800,000 women were involved in the Soviet armed forces.

- After 1945, for most of the women it became very difficult to stay in the armed forces because old stereotype notions returned back. Military sectors started restrictions on women's involvement in military sectors. At the same time as most of the military colleges were closed for women in Soviet Russia, hence women couldn't get any officer rank.

In short in spite of their huge potentiality as combatant, women were restricted deliberately and consciously.

Women in Russian military in 21st Century: In the 21st century the orientation of Russian military sectors towards women's recruitment in military has developed in a significant way. Because of the changing scenario of international politics and global security as well as women's professional development in numerous sectors the Russian armed forces transformed their way of thinking towards women combatants. These phenomenal changes are happening because of two main reasons: firstly 'the strategic and political definition of the use of force and secondly the changing relationship between armed forces and society' (Carreiras 2006). Data shows that during 2002, ten percent of the Russian armed forces were women fighters. In 2015 Tatyana Shevtsova the Russian Deputy Minister of Defence declared that during 2015 not only more than 220 women joined in Russian military academies but also almost 1000 women joined Cadet Corps. Tatyana Shevtsova viewed, 'Girls that are only now beginning their military education, in 10 years' time, perhaps, will be entering the army and after some time will take up important and responsible posts. Our mission is to train worthy successors, prepare a real pool of talent for our armed forces.' Unlike other nations in case of Russia there has never been any kind of segregation between military and non military works and positions. If there is any such order by the commander then the women too can attack along with other male combatant.

Although there is an existing debate going on about whether the Russian women will be able to join the Russian navy submarines or not, but still some very strong facts are knocking the thinking of the Russian armed forces and these are:

- In land forces women has been used for sniping because in doing so they are better than man. They have all the qualities of good snipers; they are patient, deliberate, and attentive. They work as good machine gunners as well.
- According to a report of 2015 in RIA Novosti women's army work very bravely in Russia, among them more than 35,000 women work as representatives, 2,600 recruited as officers and 72

of them are performing the commanding positions. Moreover 383 women are working in the 76th Pskov Division of the Airborne Forces. Over the past few years 710 women have joined in active military operation.

- This development in the recruitment process of women combatants in Russian military is a positive sign of change within the military organization. As a result, among 988,100 members of Russian armed forces 100,000 women work in Russia armed forces.

Discriminations faced by Russian women in military sectors: Women's participation in military sectors is basically subjected to several social, political, economic constraints. Not only in military but also in other employment sectors women have to face several types of discriminations. The process of gender discrimination is witnessed extensively in defense industry:

- It is very important to know the social status of women in combats. Most of the time women face discrimination in armed forces on the claim that they are not suitable for military sectors. The reason is that women don't have adequate strength to fit in military sectors. The stereotypical notion of society and culture considers men are only suitable for the arena of combat because they are toughest. As a result, in Soviet military women couldn't join the military colleges because they were not allowed to do so. At the same time, they could achieve officer rank in rarest cases.
- In many of cases women face sexual harassment in military sectors during their time of service; even certain times they expected to perform sexual favours for promotion in military sectors and they can't even report it all the time.
- There are certain political dilemmas prevailing in the matter of women's recruitment in defence sectors. Most of the time there is a debate on the recruitment of whether it is just an 'interest' or 'women's interest.' From the view point of feminists this changing phenomena is basically a common interest but at the same time there is a section who thinks it is only women's interest to change the structure of military recruitments.
- Women in military sectors sometimes suffer lack of proper medical care and treatment. There is scarcity of doctors and medical equipment for female combatants. Unfortunately, sometimes the other members of armed forces forget that women are even there in military sectors.

Sisters in arms: not just a concept

Lot of arguments have occurred in military sectors regarding involvement of women in military sectors. But now it has been a proven fact that there are no such reasons to ban them from

joining the defense sectors. There are several females who faced the fire and gave answer to that fire. The notions which stigmatize women from joining military sectors are no more valid. Several female combatants have proven their mental, physical and moral strength.

- Women are more responsible and hard working. According to a medical report of Soviet period, psychologically women are much stronger than men. They can deal with physical and emotional stress in a better way. Their level of punctuality and carefulness is better than men.
- It is very unfortunate and wrong to discriminate women in military sectors based on gender. On that basis some women perform much better than men. A survey shows that among 623 women 32% performed better than men on an Army Physical Fitness Test. Physically they are strengthening their capability through training. According to a comparative survey 24% of civilian women without any proper training could perform heavy army job but after six months of proper training 78% of the civilian women could perform the same job.
- Women in Russia have already proven their role as combatants. Maria Bochkareva, Marina Raskova, Manshuk Mаметova, Zinaida Portonova etc are strong examples of that. In every sector of defence they are participating with men gracefully. They can fly aircraft, use grenades and any kind of war weapon when it is necessary; drive tanks during war and many more. The Ryazan Airborne Training Academy of Russia is giving

training to women for becoming officers. They are also guiding the airborne troops.

- Mentally women are stronger than men. Hence those who believe women are unsuitable for armed forces because they are weak, fragile, and less courageous, they are actually ignoring the strength of a section of a society. In our present day scenario we can see that women can handle tough living condition strongly and history of world politics shows that female combatants lived in several tough situations as male fighters during World War I, World War II, Afghanistan War, Iraq War and many more.

**Concluding remarks:** Once Kishida Toshiko, a writer and women's rights activist quoted, 'If it is true that men are better than women because they are stronger, why aren't our sumo wrestlers in the government.' This view of her is basically a strong answer for the stereotype and patriarchal society. Women were never and are not weaker than men. The process of gender discrimination and the stereotypic notions of the society are responsible for the backwardness of females. With proper education, care, training women can perform as good as men even they can do better than men. In the defense sectors they have already performed the role of brave and strong combatants but the discriminations and problems they are facing in military sectors need to end. Now in the 21st century women are challenging the notions of male chauvinism and not only in military sectors but in many places they are performing the leading role as said by Arundhati Roy, 'Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day I can hear her breathing.'

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