

Evolving Role of Women in the Developing World

Indian Women Peacekeepers in Africa

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Gender roles and patriarchy has often limited women's participation in society and challenged their possible contributions to the community and the nation. While the 20th and the 21st century brought positive changes to women's rights and role in the society across the developed and in many parts of the developing world, women still remain burdened with traditional gender defined roles and responsibilities in the developing world.

The paper explores the evolving role of women in the developing world, with a focus on India and explore the changing attitudes towards women's participation and role in the defence services. While traditionally a male dominated profession, women in India have created space within the profession, and have become an integral part of the Indian armed forces.

The paper further explores India's efforts in creating a women's only peacekeeping group, which have successfully carried out peacekeeping missions in Africa and represents a major milestone for the empowerment of women and women's leadership in the developing world.

The paper also examines the opportunities and challenges facing women in the Indian armed forces, and how structural challenges still limit women's participation and access to leadership positions in the profession.

Keywords: women's rights, developing world, gender defined roles, India's efforts

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Introduction

In developing countries across Asia and Africa, the role of women in the society remains limited due to strong patriarchal traditions and gender-based professional roles. These gender-based roles and patriarchal traditions have limited not only access and opportunities for women but have impacted the growth possibilities and overall welfare of the society.²

According to the 2024 SDG Gender Index, while no countries in the global north or the global south has achieved gender parity, countries in the global north are considerably ahead in reaching gender parity and equal opportunities for women in the society.³

Most Asian and African countries are signatories to various international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979),⁴ which focuses on gender equality in social, political and economic avenues among various other women empowerment provisions and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 – Gender Equality) (2015),⁵ which is part of the broader UN 2030 Agenda, to empower women and girls in developing countries. However, challenges and strong structural barriers hinder women's participation in society, and restricts their access to quality education, job market and career growth opportunities.

Women in developing countries are often expected to perform secondary professions with limited career growth and financial opportunities, or to remain at home full time as housewives and care providers for their families.⁶ These widely accepted norms have created long lasting challenges and barriers for women, preventing them from advancing their status in the society and be involved in critical decision-making and leadership roles.

In India, similar to many developing countries, women often face challenges, which not only brings down the ideals of women empowerment in society but also question the democratic credentials and aspirations of India. To mitigate these challenges and open up opportunities for women in the society, the Indian government has taken various measures, such as constitutional provisions like Article 14, which guarantees equality before the law, Article 39(d), which ensures equal pay for equal work and Article 42 – which provides provisions for maternity benefits and humane working conditions.⁷

India has also enacted laws to prevent inherited historical social issues such as child marriages and dowries. The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961)⁸ and The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) ban medieval practices in India and safeguard a modern livelihood for women in India.⁹

² OKPE–OTHMAN–OSMAN 2021.

³ Equal Measures 2030 2024.

⁴ See: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw>

⁵ See: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

⁶ OKPE–OTHMAN–OSMAN 2021.

⁷ Constitution of India, see: <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india>

⁸ The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, see: <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/1679>

⁹ UNFPA 2022.

The Indian government has also created public schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015), which means to save the girl child and educate her and the Mahila Shakti Kendra (2017), which are rural centres, promoting women's empowerment through entrepreneurship. India has also enacted strong reservations at public higher education institutions for women and through these schemes, the government and the lawmakers are attempting to bridge the gender gap in, and create an equal, equitable and safe society for women in India.¹⁰

However, while constitutional provisions, reservation in government jobs and educational institutions and public policy initiatives have positively improved women's role in the Indian society, it can be argued that opening up the Indian Armed Forces to women was a major milestone for women's empowerment in India and broke the long established patriarchal glass ceiling in Indian society.

Women and the Indian Armed Forces

The Indian subcontinent has a long history of women warriors who have sacrificed their lives for the motherland in battles against invaders and enemies.

Among various women in precolonial and colonial times, Queen Rani Durgavati (1524–1564) from Gondwana gave up her life in a battle against the Mughal invaders and Queen Rani Lakshmibai (1828–1858) died while fighting against the British.¹¹

During the colonial era, women's from not only privileged backgrounds but from various socio-economic status fought against the British colonisation of India and played a key role in the 1857 Indian uprising against the British.¹²

In the 20th century, in the Indian National Army (INA), which started an armed rebellion against the British during the Second World War, The Rani of Jhansi Regiment was established, which was the women's unit of the INA. The regiment was led by Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan and over 1,000 female volunteers joined the army and took intensive training in jungle warfare, specialised attack and defence strategies and tank warfare.¹³

In the post-independence era as well, attempts were made by the government to encourage women to join the armed services. But unlike the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army which specialised in armed warfare between 1947 and the 1990s, women were prohibited in combat roles and joined the armed services as doctors, nurses and administrative staff.¹⁴

In the 1990s, under a gradual expansion policy for entry into the armed services, roles such as logistics, legal, education, and engineering were opened up for women and in

¹⁰ Ministry of Women and Child Development 2025.

¹¹ SENGUPTA–BASU 2023.

¹² KUMARI–SHASTRI 2024.

¹³ See: <https://www.netajisubhasbose.org/rani-of-jhansi-regiment>

¹⁴ MISHRA et al. 2022.

the following decades roles such as transportation pilots were opened for women, and eventually in 2016¹⁵ the Indian Air Force opened fighter pilot roles for women, making India among the few nations globally to have female fighter pilots.¹⁶

In 2019, a major decision by the Supreme Court of India opened Permanent Commission for women in all armed services, and women were allowed to become part of all the three armed services, the navy, the air force and the military in combat roles.¹⁷

Beyond the participation of women in the armed forces in India, the country has also created room and opportunities for women to join UN-led peacekeeping missions which serve as an ideal example for the empowerment women in the developing world.

India's women peacekeepers in Africa

India has been among the largest contributors to UN-led peacekeeping missions in Africa and has participated in various missions across the continent since the 1950s. India has sent over 200,000 troops to over 49 missions in various UN missions, mostly in Africa.

While most of the Indian missions involved male defence personnel, in 2007 India deployed the first all-female Formed Police Unit (FPU) during the UN-led peacekeeping mission in Liberia.¹⁸

An all-female Formed Police Unit was the first in the history of UN peacekeeping missions and was assigned critical roles in peacekeeping and maintaining law and order in conflict zones. The role of the all-female Formed Police Unit included maintaining crowd control and public order management, protection of vulnerable citizens, especially women and children, addressing cases of sexual violence and gender based crimes and train local law enforcement agencies.¹⁹

The all-female FPU also created long lasting impact in not only Liberia but also the wider world as it encouraged local women to join security forces and services and became an example of women's empowerment in the developing world.

In an interview to the UN News Centre, Colonel Madhubala Bala, the contingent's commander said: "When the local women see the female peacekeepers, they get inspired by them – [they see] ladies can perform the same role as male counterparts." She also pointed out the impact on young Liberian girls who were inspired by women soldiers.²⁰

The participation of women in security services was also appreciated by the Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who said in a speech: "If I had my will, I would have recommended for another unit of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to

¹⁵ Bizz Buzz 2024.

¹⁶ PANDEY 2015.

¹⁷ The Hindu Bureau 2024.

¹⁸ United Nations India 2025.

¹⁹ United Nations 2016.

²⁰ United Nations 2016.

leave, so that the Indian Formed Police Unit (FPU) would continue its stay in the country for the time being.”²¹

Beyond Liberia, India has continued and expanded the deployment of female peacekeepers in war zones, and as of 2025, India’s female peacekeepers are present in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Lebanon, the Golan Heights, Western Sahara, and Abyei.²²

The long-term impact of the Indian women’s peacekeeping force was also that various other countries, from the developing world, such as Rwanda, Bangladesh, and Senegal²³ also created women’s only peacekeeping groups, as a positive step in deeply patriarchal global south.

Challenges

While through its constitutional provisions, public policies reservations in education and jobs and creating space in the armed forces and peacekeeping missions, the Indian government has taken strong steps in the positive direction, the role of women in the Indian society still remains challenged and needs radical steps and policies.

Among various issues in the Indian society, the two main challenges are the safety of young girls and women, which restrict them from leaving the safety of their homes to pursue careers in bigger cities, and the challenges women face in advancing to leadership roles and progressing in their careers.

Gender-based violence and sexual harassment remains a key challenge in the Indian society and has created an atmosphere of fear and limitations for women. This has also migrated to the armed services, and despite the trainings and strict code of conduct of armed forces, sexual harassment has become a major challenge in the Indian armed forces as well.²⁴ India should empower local organisations and create strict rules for cases of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in order to create a safer society for women.

Beyond the above, another key challenge is career growth and gender pay parity for women in India. According to a study on the gender economic gap by the World Economic Forum, Sub-Saharan Africa would need 63 years of consistent efforts to reduce the gender economic gap, while the Middle East and North Africa would need 356 years.²⁵

The same study also explores South Asia which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh among others, and found that the region would need 1,000 years of consistent policy efforts to achieve gender parity and equal economic opportunities for women.

²¹ United Nations 2016.

²² Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 2025.

²³ See: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/women-peacekeeping>

²⁴ BALAAJI–MALAIMAGAL 2018.

²⁵ World Economic Forum 2017.

Conclusion

While women's participation in the armed forces of India have increased and have become an example for women's empowerment in India and the developing world, challenges remain in creating long-term policies to establish a safe, equitable and rewarding career for women in the country and ensure their rights, dignity and safety.

Women in India will play a critical role in realising Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dream of making India a developed nation by 2047. By opening up society and eliminating the challenges facing women, women can become the driving force behind India's future growth.

As Mahatma Gandhi famously pointed out, the greatness of a nation can be judged by how it treats its weakest member, and by empowering women, India would become a more equal, equitable and stronger nation. Policy makers should create strict laws, effective policies and long-term strategies, and Indian society should ensure the safety of women in the workplace, at home and elsewhere.

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