

Women Soldiers in the Israel Defence Forces: Changing Trends of Gender Equality and Military Service

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Abstract : Officially, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) follows a policy of 'gender equality and partnership' which institutionalises norms regarding equal duty towards the nation. It reiterates the equality in unbiased opportunities and resources for Jewish men and women to participate in the military as equal citizens. At the same time, as a military institution, the IDF supports gender biases and crystallises the same through various interactions among women soldiers, male soldiers and the institution. These biases are expressed through various stages and processes in the military institution like biased training, discriminatory postings of women soldiers, lack of combat training and acceptance of sexual harassment. The gender-military debates in Israel is largely devoted to female emancipation and converting the militarised women's experiences into mainstream debates. This critical scholarship, largely female-based and located in Israel, has been consistently critical of the structural policies of the IDF that have led to continued discriminatory practices against women soldiers. This has compelled the military to increase its intake of women soldiers and make its structural policies more gender-friendly. Nonetheless, the continued thriving of gender discrimination in the IDF resulted in scholars looking deep into the failure of these policies in bringing about a change. This article looks into two research objectives, firstly to analyse existing gender relations in the IDF which impact the practices and prejudices in the institution and secondly to look beyond the structural discrimination as part of the gender debates in the IDF. The proposed research uses the structural-functional model as a framework to study the discourses and norms emerging out of the interaction between gender and military as two distinct social institutions. Changing gender-military debates will be discussed in great detail to understanding the in-depth relation between the Israeli society and the military due to the conscription model. The main arguments of the paper deal with the functional aspect of the military service rather than the structural component of the institution. Traditional stereotypes of military institutions along with cultural notions of a female body restrict the complete integration of women soldiers despite favourable legislations and policies. These result in functional discriminations like uneven promotion, sexual violence, restructuring gender identities and creating militarised bodies. The existing prejudices encourage younger women recruits to choose from within the accepted pink-collared jobs in the military rather than 'breaking the barriers.' Some women recruits do try to explore new avenues and make a mark for themselves. Most of them face stiff discrimination but they accept it as part of military life. The cyclical logic behind structural norms leading to functional discrimination which then emphasises traditional stereotypes and hampers change in the institutional norms compels the IDF to continue to strive towards gender equality within the institution without practical realisation.

Keywords : women soldiers, Israel Defence Forces, gender-military debates, security studies

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