

Women in Bangladesh Para Commando Units - Ziran Rukaiya.pdf

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Submission date: 13-Oct-2025 11:55PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 2779992054

File name: Women_in_Bangladesh_Para_Commando_Units_-_Ziran_Rukaiya.pdf (254.62K)

Word count: 3310

Character count: 18287

IARCO RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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Women in Bangladesh Para Commando Units: Structural Barriers to Participation and the National Payoffs of Inclusion

Abstract

This paper analyses the involvement of women in Bangladesh Para Commando Brigade and the obstacles that are embedded in the structures, culture, institutions, and policies. Although women have been in the armed forces since 2000, they are still restricted to using combat arms and commando training. Examination of military reports and policy declarations reveal that institutional norms and cultural orientations are used to enforce male dominance. Cases of comparison in the United States, Israel, Norway, and India also provide ways of reform and also indicate the virtues of inclusion, like enhanced operational capacity, enhanced community participation, and adherence to international standards. The paper finds that the introduction of strategic reforms, such as the establishment of the National Defense Gender Policy and incremental incorporation, may allow women to play a significant role in elite units and promote security and social development in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Gender integration; Bangladesh Army; Para Commando Brigade; women in combat; military inclusion; structural barriers

Introduction

Over the past several decades, the scope of women in military forces around the globe has increased although front line service and even special units are not equally represented. Bangladesh is one of the largest sources of peacekeeping in the United Nations [1], but until the beginning of the 2000s, it did not allow women to become officers and later in 2015, it did not allow them to become soldiers [2]. These measures coincide with its **National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (20192025)** although significant loopholes exist. Women continue to be locked out of elite units like the Para Commando Brigade - the main special force of the Army that deals with counterterrorism, airborne operations and unconventional warfare [3]. The Bangladesh female personnel are typically employed in support arms and are not allowed to serve in infantry and armored corps, which is the recruitment pool of the Para Commandos [3]. This exclusion is both policy constrained and culturally inclined. Other armies like that of the United States and Norway have now opened all combat positions to women worldwide with Israel and India slowly integrating [4]. It has been demonstrated that talented women are capable of fulfilling stringent standards and delivering functional advantages such as enhancing the talent pools, strengthening civil-military relations, and enriching the gender equality [4, 5]. The obstacles in Bangladesh are institutional, cultural and structural. Nevertheless, their elimination might lead to the enhancement of military, a closer connection with the population, and reinforcement of the national image in the international arena.

Research Question

RQ1: What structural, institutional, cultural, and policy barriers prevent women from participating in the Bangladesh Para Commando Brigade?

RQ2: What potential national security, operational, and social benefits could result from their inclusion?

Literature Review

The academic literature indicates that there is a culture of masculinity in the military and that gender integration has been hindered by institutional resistance based on the myths of cohesion and effectiveness [6, 7]. Liberal feminist theory asserts that not being selected to fight is an expression of a stereotype in place of capability. The research in Bangladesh reveals gender power inequalities in the structural, social, and policy domains [8]. Exceptional physical fitness is required of the special forces. Although gender neutral criteria may be achieved, the number of women who can achieve these standards is lesser. In Norway, technically women were technically allowed to be in the special forces [12], but in a period of ten years none had passed the selectivity process needed [9]. It resulted in the establishment of Jegertroppen, an all-women special operations unit formed as a pilot in 2014 to be deployed in Afghanistan in response to operational requirements. The Afghanistan war had exposed logistical restrictions to the extent that male soldiers were not even able to communicate with local women to aid in searches and intelligence collection [9]. Attitudes towards women at war are usually supported by culture. Traditional perceptions in South Asia do not help in integration. Women are still not present in the infantry and armored units in Bangladesh, which is an institutional norm. Studies have shown that a gendered culture in the military supports male dominance and restricts mentorship and career development [8]. The same cultural barriers would be encountered in Israel where women were historically excluded in elite commando units, but legal and social pressure is altering that. Some international bodies like United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 encourage inclusion of women in peace and security. Bangladesh assumed a National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security (2019-2025). Assessment of barriers on the MOWIP initiative indicated that women constitute approximately 2 percent of the military and are concentrated at the junior ranks which restricts progress. The report recommends increasing women across combat roles and units. A review of comparative literature shows a spectrum of approaches and outcomes in integrating women into elite forces in USA, Israel, Norway and India:

- **United States:** The history of the U.S. military is a well-known one, with the 1994 implementation of the so-called Risk Rule, which officially prohibited women from ground combat to the combat exclusion policy ban finally lifted in 2013-2015. According to researchers such as Emma Moore (2020), five years into the integration, women have gradually been joining closed sectors such as infantry and armor and have also made some firsts (e.g. the first woman Army Rangers in 2015, the first woman Green Beret in 2020) [5]. The research by the RAND Corporation and others commissioned on behalf of U.S. SOCOM and the Marine Corps found no reason to advise that any jobs should be closed to women, prompting the Defense Department to open all jobs, based on conditions. Initial fears about unit performance have been mostly disproved or neutralized, a 2020 U.S. Army report to Congress even found that opening combat jobs to women increased the pool of potential recruits and improved the performance of the unit due to increased diversity [15]. The American special operations forces have also started to admit women in some of its elite training pipelines albeit at a very low number.
- **Israel:** Academic and policy studies of Israel [4] bring out a paradox: Israel has been conscripting women since its inception and it has many female soldiers, but it has lagged behind many western countries in admitting women to its most elite combat formations. In 1995 (following the case of Alice Miller), the IDF made combat aviation open to women, and, slowly, to light infantry battalions of mixed gender to defend the border.

But until the early 2020s, such units as Sayeret Matkal or Navy SEALS (Shayetet 13) were still policy-only male. The very heated debate in Israel, which has involved petitions to the High Court by female candidates, is described in the literature, which is forcing the IDF to be more of a merit-based institution. As of 2023-24, the first women to meet the selection criteria to join an IDF special forces unit (in this case, the elite Air Force search-and-rescue unit of Unit 669) were reported in the media. This milestone, as reported by sources such as The Jerusalem Post towards the end of 2024, suggests that there is a possibility that the cultural tide is turning even in cultures that were previously opposed to women in the special operations. Studies of the Israeli example tend to highlight the pressures (legal and social) exerted by the outside world and how the military came to reassess arguments against women and found that when held to strict standards and gender-neutral tests, women are able to join the military without difficulty on most jobs [10]. The gaps that exist in Israel have been more of tradition and political reluctance than statistics on performance.

- **Norway:** Norway has led the literature with respect to gender integration in the military. It had decades of women in all combat positions (full gender-neutral since 1984), and in 2015 was the first NATO nation to institute female conscription of all draft-age individuals. According to scholars, the motivation of Norway was not only ideological (gender equality is a societal value) but also practical. The case of Norway is often mentioned because of the establishment of Jegertruppen, the first all-female special operations unit in the world, which was created in the form of a pilot in 2014. Research and publications (e.g. NATO briefs on gender in combat units) document that Norwegian special forces officers found that there was an operational requirement during the Afghanistan war that the male troops could not communicate with local women because of cultural expectations, which prevented searches and intelligence collection. Training female operators enhanced the Norwegian Special Operations Command significantly to be able to operate in conservative environments.
- **India:** The Indian case is one of the regional points of reference in the case of Bangladesh. Historically, the Indian Armed Forces, like the Bangladesh one, did not permit females in ground combat. It has started to shift in the 2010s through judicial interventions and policy changes, e.g. in 2020, Indian courts directed the military to give permanent commission to women officers of support arms, and subsequently to enable women to take entrance exams to the National Defense Academy. But it is only at the level of special forces or commando teams that women are still in their infancy. According to literature and news reports, it is still the case that no woman was ever a combat operator in the Parachute Regiment (Special Forces) of the Indian Army, which is a policy domain exclusively for men. In 2023, a female Army Medical Corps officer Captain Deeksha C. Mudadevannavar became the first female officer to be appointed to the top special force unit of the Indian Army the Parachute Regiment. This was hailed in Indian media as a glorious moment, though it is worth it explaining that she is a medical officer with a Special Forces battalion, not as a special force combat trooper [11, 12]. Her case, however, made her go through parachute training and other commando-related training, to prove herself and provide a way through which women in supporting roles can be incorporated to serve with the elite units. Also, the armed forces of the central

police in India have moved forward - in late 2022, the Central Industrial Security Force became the first police service to raise its first all-women commando squad to secure its citizens, making ground similarly to the Norwegian female unit but in a police force.

Methodology

- a) **Research Design:** The research design will be a qualitative and multi-source research design that involves policy analysis, literature review as well as comparative case studies. This methodology reflects the delicate and detailed aspect of the inclusion of women into the Para Commando Brigade of Bangladesh.
- b) **Data Collection:** The official documents included in the primary data include the National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security 2019 to 2025, the recruitment policies, the position of the Armed Forces Division, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as publications of the Bangladesh Army. Peer reviewed journals and books were considered secondary data. Mahbub Uz Zaman (2021) explored the issue of gendered institutional problems in the Journal of Gender and Power article [8].
- c) **Comparative Case Approach:** Relevant case studies (United States, Israel, Norway and India) were chosen. Those settings demonstrate diverse experience of including women in combat and special forces and contribute to learning a lesson in Bangladesh.
- d) **Validation:** Sources were checked on information. News articles were found to make claims against official policy. Qualitative analysis was supported by statistical data like the percentage of women as total personnel. The comparison between the countries was done on the basis of NATO, RAND and other reputable institutions.
- e) **Scope and Limitations:** The case study is on the Bangladesh Army Para Commando Brigade. There was also a paucity of publicly available data on gender disaggregation in special forces, causing it to rely on indirect data like policy exclusionary practices and lack of reports of women commandos. Regardless of these limitations, multiple sources triangulation gave plausible conclusions.

Results and Analysis

Barriers to Women's Participation in the Para Commando Brigade: Although there has been some development in the inclusion of women in the armed forces, there are still impediments that stand on the way of joining the Para Commando Brigade. The policy limitations play the central role: women officers are not allowed to serve in infantry and armored branches which are the pathways to special forces and women officers officially do not attend commando schools. Not even in exceptional cases like female paratroopers are extended to commando service. Barriers in structure are lack of proper facilities, men-designed equipment and unaddressed physical training issues. It is also worth noting that the Army did not officially approve of female soldiers to wear the hijab with their uniforms until late 2023 - the change in policies demonstrates a hesitant approach to adjusting to cultural and religious norms [13, 14]. It indicates that although the military is still starting to accommodate some of the cultural issues, it has not tackled the fundamental problem of women being able to be in combat positions. There are organizational barriers that restrict career paths, as women are not put in combat leadership positions that lead to elite units. Finally, the absence of a clear enabling policy perpetuates tacit exclusion.

National Payoffs of Inclusion: Allowing women into elite units would expand the talent pool and strengthen national security. Feminine commandos would help counter terrorism and maintain peace since women would be deployed in areas with conservative communities and be used to collect vital intelligence. Mixed gender teams are also tactically beneficial, since they have been demonstrated to enhance mission success in other countries where support teams are culturally endorsed. There is also a symbolic underlying meaning to inclusion, which strengthens gender equality¹⁴ and improves the status of Bangladesh in United Nations peace operations. In the long run, the presence of women in combat positions would act as a talent pool in providing senior leaders and enhancing retention of competent officers. To sum up, the policy, structural and institutional, and cultural issues surrounding the exclusion of women in the Para Commando Brigade in Bangladesh are intertwined. Being able to overcome these challenges would come with a big security, operational, and symbolic payoff, making the armed forces less exclusive and more effective.

Recommendations: The participation of women in the Para Commando Brigade should be done in a structured and inclusive manner to facilitate the meaningful contribution of women. A pilot project to train and test a small group of female officers or soldiers on commando roles should also be implemented so that the military is able to get acquainted with the issues and take gradual steps necessary to overcome them. Combined with this, mentorship and preparatory services have to be offered by matching aspiring candidates to trained commandos and providing them with specific physical preparation services to achieve the rigorous fitness requirements. Important reforms in policy are also essential, and recruitment and training rules are to be adjusted, removing gendered exclusions and a clear declaration made that all branches and courses are accessible to qualified women. Provision of infrastructure such as proper living quarters and sanitation facilities will also play a bigger role in ensuring that women do not logistically get barred to attend training and deployments. Simultaneously, cultural sensitization programs must be in place to tackle the unconscious bias, advance professional respect, as well as create a setting in which women are treated as equal colleagues. Lastly, the process of integration must be monitored closely and feedback from both male and female personnel must be used to perfect policies and practices as time goes on. All these would create a properly laid down route towards the integration of women and at the same time maintain the highest standards of the Para Commando Brigade.

Conclusion

The excluded women in the Para Commando Brigade of Bangladesh are those who have been denied by structural, cultural, institutional and policy factors. Despite progress in the wider armed forces, formal restrictions on commando training and entrenched gender norms sustain a male-only force. Comparative cases from the United States, Israel, Norway, and India show that integration is possible without lowering standards and can strengthen operational effectiveness. Inclusion would increase the talent base, enhance the intelligence and participation in sensitive operations, and enhance the international image of gender equality in Bangladesh. A few female commandos would be in a position to provide disproportionate operational and symbolic returns. The elimination of obstacles to the involvement of women in elite forces is a possibility and a positive move. Planned reforms will lead to creating a better, more flexible Bangladesh Army and gender equality as well as national development.

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