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International

## Israel's Female Soldiers Face Military Inspection

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*Israel's military has convened its first international conference to highlight women's integration in the last 60 years. But most Israeli combat roles are off limits and activists say there is still room for progress in tackling "inbuilt chauvinism."*

TEL AVIV, Israel (WOMENSENEWS)--Israel, the only country where military service is compulsory for both men and women, has marked six decades of women's service in the army by hosting its first international conference on women's integration.

The Israeli Defense Forces gathering this week drew representatives from 11 countries--including India, Austria and Colombia--who take an active part in integration of women in militaries and defense ministries. Organizers said it was a chance to highlight Israel's experience while emphasizing integrated women's service in militaries across the globe.

"We have a lot of things in common," Brig.-Gen. Yehudit Grisaro, advisor to the chief of the general staff on women's issues, said during the sidelines of the conference. "Whoever discusses women's service in the army needs to deal with similar challenges that involve culture, stereotypes, gender perceptions, social issues, religion and state."

Perhaps no country is more aware of these challenges than Israel.

Although the Jewish state has marked a number of landmark milestones for women in the military in recent years, activists both inside and outside the army are still pushing for greater equality.

Israeli women make up 33 percent of the country's compulsory service, compared to about 15 percent in the United States and fewer than 10 percent in most European militaries. But the majority of combat positions are still closed to them.

### Road Map for Women's Service

Last year a special committee of women from the military, civil society and academia produced a road map on the future of women's service,

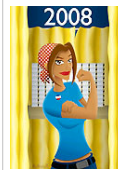


Female soldiers on duty in Jerusalem in 2005.

Credit: Gullad Kahn / WPN

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recommending that additional positions, including more combat roles, be opened up.

"We have a clear picture of what areas we need to make progress on, at what pace and how we will move forward," Grisaro, who supervised the conference, told Women's eNews, adding that not all suggestions will be carried out quickly.

The committee, headed by an army reserves major general, also discussed creating a gender-neutral system of selection and screening as well as adjusting training and infrastructure to take into account male and female physical differences.

One controversial suggestion is to expand women in combat roles, where they are no more than 3.5 percent of personnel. These positions are voluntary for women, who today hold a variety of roles that include administrative, intelligence, technology and combat support.

During the 2006 Lebanon War, 14 percent of female reserves were placed in combat positions, according to the Israeli Defense Forces. Most served as medics.

Proponents of expansion face opposition, particularly from religious leaders and parliamentarians who oppose male and female soldiers mixing too closely.

Some men inside the military also oppose having women in combat, said Lt. Col. Ze'ev Lehrer, head of the research branch of Grisaro's department. That makes some women feel they are under constant scrutiny during basic training and causes them to overcompensate, leading to a higher level of injuries and disillusionment.

"Military establishments are typically a masculine, male institution," Lehrer said at the conference. "Seeing a woman in combat is a dramatic social and cultural change and indeed this process is not easy."

### **Six Decades of Service**

Women have served in the Israeli Defense Forces since the country's inception six decades ago and a small number fought in the War of Independence in 1948. But it wasn't until 1995 that a Supreme Court case opened air force pilots' courses to women after a ban imposed in the 1950s.

Today, there are 19 female air crew officers in the Israeli Air Force, including 11 pilots. In 2000 the army service law was amended to state that women are equal to men in their right to serve excluding positions "whose demands and essence preclude women" from doing so.

Grisaro says that since then taboos on traditional roles have been broken, women no longer serve in a separate women's corps and they have been gradually incorporated into a limited number of combat positions. All face-to-face combat positions and the armored corps, including tank operators, remain closed.

Women constitute 10 to 30 percent of combat positions that are open to them, such as border guards, artillery, anti-aircraft battalions and chemical defense units. They also comprise 70 percent of the "light infantry" unit Carakal, which performs routine security along Israel's southern border with Jordan and Egypt.

### Innovative Responses



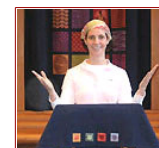
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"Ninety percent of (military) occupations are open for women's service," said Grisaro, the third Israeli woman to reach brigadier general rank. Women "play a significant role and are not just there for decoration, including in combat positions" but the great challenge is to penetrate all military ranks.

One way would be to increase women in army combat roles from 3.5 percent, says Orna Sasson-Levy, a senior lecturer in sociology, anthropology and gender studies at Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan.

"It's a very, very low percentage if you take into consideration that women are 30 percent of the Israeli military, which is much higher than any Western military," said Sasson-Levy in a phone interview.

Most women are in "second-grade combat" such as anti-aircraft artillery and light infantry because "they are not considered capable enough to be in real infantry," Sasson-Levy said.

The selection process takes into account a recruit's preferences and combat roles require a three-year commitment rather than the two years usually required. Men are always required to serve three years, beginning at 18.

### **Gender Views Fan Opposition**

Some opponents, like professor emeritus Martin Van Creveld, argue that the "whole feminist experiment of getting women to enter the military and participate in combat has been a ludicrous failure," in Israel and elsewhere.

"Partly because women themselves don't want to (fight) and partly because there are so many things that they are not up to physically," Van Creveld, who taught history at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said in a phone interview. "If you go into combat as an infantryman, then you have to carry up to 60 pounds or more. I don't know many women that can do that."

But a June 2002 Israeli Defense Forces report said that the majority of women "perform satisfactorily in combat position trainings and carry out the tasks they are assigned very well according to their commanders."

Naomi Chazan, a former parliamentarian who was instrumental in amending the 2000 service law, says women are still not being integrated into all combat roles they want due to "inbuilt chauvinism" in the army and pressure from national religious groups.

Israel "is the only place where women have compulsory service in the world today, and if it has to happen it should be done equally," Chazan said in a phone interview. "Hopefully, it will humanize the army but not as much as peace will."

Sasson-Levy argues that women's rights activists should not expect that having more women in combat or other positions will change the military or advance women's overall status in society.

Her research indicates that women in combat roles tend to adopt the "masculine image" of the combat soldier, looking down upon other women and refusing to work with them.

"If you adopt the idea that to be an officer you have to be like a man, you



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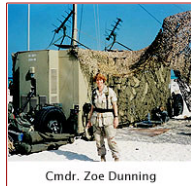
adopt the existing system; you don't change it," she said. "The system changes the women."

*Brenda Gazzar is a freelance journalist based in Jerusalem.*

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