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Female soldiers still rare in combat

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JERUSALEM -- When Alice Miller petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court in 1995 to let her become an air force pilot, the country's president, a famous airman in his younger days, laughingly compared women flying planes to men darning socks.

But the court ruled in her favor, opening combat jobs to women for the first time. One of them was Sgt. 1st Class Keren Tendler, a flight technician killed last summer when her helicopter was shot down by Hezbollah guerrillas over Lebanon.

The fighting Israeli female soldier may endure as a stereotype, but in reality, a female death in combat is extremely rare. Save for isolated cases in the Jewish state's 1948 war for independence, women traditionally were confined to clerical and support jobs. But things have changed, and now an army-appointed commission of academics and officers is studying whether to integrate the army's last all-male preserve: infantry, armor and special forces.

Commission member Naomi Chazan, a prominent feminist and a former lawmaker, says the focus will be on "increasing the equality" of women in uniform -- and that means admitting them to tank and infantry formations.

But Yaakov Amidror, a retired major general, said, "Gender integration causes sexual tension and is detrimental to combat performance, and it's just not worth it."

Lt. Col. Liora Rubinstein, a women's affairs adviser to the military chief of staff, acknowledges that few women volunteer for combat units. Many are turned off by having to sign on for an extra year to serve in most combat jobs.

Lt. Sivan Ben-Ezra, 21, commands a platoon in a mixed-sex "light infantry" unit, currently the closest women can get to front-line infantry. She isn't surprised that more women aren't interested in jobs like hers.

"We have girls who come for the boots and the cool uniform. Those girls don't last," she said.

All Israelis except Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews are drafted -- men for three years, women for two.

Lt. Ben-Ezra's unit is 70 percent female, and its main duty is to patrol Israel's peaceful borders with Egypt and Jordan. Another mixed unit operates remote cameras and sensors to police the more sensitive Syrian and Lebanese borders.

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During last summer's conflict in Lebanon, a small number of female soldiers fired artillery shells and cluster bombs, served on navy vessels and flew combat sorties as pilots and weapons-system operators. All told, about 1,500 women serve in combat jobs -- about 2.5 percent of female conscripts, according to army figures.

The turning point was Miss Miller's Supreme Court petition, which provoked then-President Ezer Weizman to belittle her in a phone conversation as a "maidele," Yiddish for a young girl, and ask whether she could imagine a man darning socks. He later said the comment was in jest.

Miss Miller, then 23, failed the flight-school entrance exams, but the court ruling forced the army to open all jobs to women or present a good reason not to.

Some Orthodox Jews protested that mixing the sexes was immodest, and other Israelis voiced concerns that the public would not tolerate women being killed or falling captive. But even the grim circumstances of Sgt. Tandler's death last summer did not draw calls to reverse the policy.

The military has taken the precaution of making strict separation of barracks and bathrooms mandatory, and many commanders bar all physical contact save for shaking hands and patting shoulders.

The reformers are inspired by Canada and several European nations, which have integrated infantry units, and from the apparent easing of the U.S. military's ban on women in ground combat.

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